Ecclesiastes

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Foreword

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2
The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.
Ecclesiastes 12:1
Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

“Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas” in Latin—“all is vanity” (= emptiness), says Solomon the Preacher, who is regarded as almost the wisest man in the whole Bible. He is really saying: you can walk all around it and look at it from every side, but it remains simply empty. Visible life here, as such, is utterly empty without God and the invisible world.

Even for believers, our earthly life is, in itself, a “vain life”. For that reason man ought to know God—the Lord Jesus Christ, in the biblical sense—so that substance may be given to our practical life here on earth. What would the Lord have us do? Lofty things? Improve the world or convert it? Live righteously? Achieve something, or leave all sorts of things behind for the next generation? Not at all. Eating and drinking, wearing white garments, and, for instance, enjoying life with the wife whom thou lovest —because God hath given thee “all thy vain days” here upon the earth.

Beyond that, we ought to find our true satisfaction in the Truth—and that does not come from “under the sun”. We find it above the sun, and it is made known to us through God’s Word. Chapter 12 concludes that you should seek God’s Wisdom especially early. When you are still young and not hindered by acquired knowledge and experiences, and not yet by the decline that belongs to mortal man. The Wisdom of God found early has a positive effect upon the rest of your life. Wisdom teaches you to put things into perspective and to weigh them rightly, so that you do not take them too hard. Then you have a good many fewer worries.

Whoever truly wishes to be wise sets his trust in “Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom”.

1 Corinthians 1:24
But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.
1 Corinthians 1:30
But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

Then one is a believer, one is wise, and one receives life—everlasting life, even.

“Preacher” means “caller” or “crier”, because the writer calls us not to go along with “the rush of the nations”. He calls us out of that world, in which man’s philosophy rules and where there is no place for God. This Book is not cynical, pessimistic, or even depressing. It is a very realistic portrayal of the various positions of the individual earthly man in the present and in his future. It sweeps the floor with human striving and with “the madness

of everyday life”. It exposes the wholly inappropriate pride of man, who imagines that—with his help—the world, or anything at all, must be changed or improved. That human activity, the conclusion repeatedly drawn from twelve chapters of realism, leads to nothing.
Ecclesiastes 1 — The vanity of all earthly things
Ecclesiastes 2 — Joy and riches bring no happiness
Ecclesiastes 3 — Everything has its time and course
Ecclesiastes 4 — Life is full of torment and disappointment
Ecclesiastes 5 — Wisdom for living
Ecclesiastes 6 — The enjoyment of riches is incomplete
Ecclesiastes 7 — Commendation of wisdom, contentment, and simplicity
Ecclesiastes 8 — Reverence for the king and the authorities
Ecclesiastes 9 — Enjoy God’s gift with gladness
Ecclesiastes 10 — The mischief of folly
Ecclesiastes 11 — Do thy work well
Ecclesiastes 12 — Fear God in thy youth; godliness is the sum of all commandments

Commonly occurring words in the Book Ecclesiastes

- Vanity / Meaningless / Vapor (hevel) — Appears ~35-38 times — The book's signature word, framing the entire work (e.g., "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" in 1:2 and 12:8). It describes life as fleeting, insubstantial, and paradoxical.
- Under the sun — Appears ~29 times — Refers to life on earth from a human perspective, emphasizing worldly limitations and repetition (e.g., "nothing new under the sun").
- Time — Appears ~41 times (highly frequent in chapter 3) — Central to the famous poem "a time for everything" (3:1-8), highlighting life's seasons and unpredictability.
- Toil / Labor / Work — Frequent (dozens of times, often with "profit" or "gain") — Questions the value of human effort (e.g., "What does man gain from all his toil under the sun?").
- God — Repeated often, especially in contrasts with human striving — The book concludes that true meaning comes from fearing God (12:13).
- Chasing after the wind (or "striving after wind") — Appears ~9 times — Metaphor for futile pursuits.
- Wisdom / Wise — Common, often shown as limited or burdensome — Contrasted with folly.
- Good / Better — Used in comparisons of life's experiences.
- Enjoy / Joy / Pleasure — Advised as a gift from God amid vanity (e.g., eat, drink, and enjoy your toil).

Ecclesiastes 1

I am aware of the unpopularity of the book of Ecclesiastes—or at least of its obscurity. Personally I have never heard anyone speak about this book. Perhaps only a quotation from chapter 12, about “remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth”, or the phrase “vanity of vanities; all is vanity”. To gain an impression of what it is actually about, we read Ecclesiastes 1. That is pericope 1, for this book can be divided into various pericopes, all of which end with a conclusion – as Ecclesiastes 1:1–18 ends with pericope .

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.
What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?
One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.
The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.
The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.
All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.
All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.
Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.
There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.
I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem.
And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.
I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.
That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.
I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.
And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.
For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

At the end of chapter 1 the Preacher comes to precisely the same conclusion as in the rest of this biblical book. He merely words it differently from time to time; he comes in from another angle. That conclusion may be summarised as: life here under the sun. That is such a

fixed expression in the early chapters of Ecclesiastes. Life here under the sun has no point—because that is the meaning of “vanity”, the expression we have already met several times. “Vanity” carries the sense of emptiness, of meaninglessness.
Everything we have read in these verses comes to nothing—at least from verse 4 to about verse 11. All sorts of processes and activities in nature, in creation, take place, continue, are maintained, but they serve no further purpose, because nothing changes. That is really the chief message of the whole book. Nothing changes anyway, whatever you do and however busy you make yourself.
Anyone who wants to change the world—even with the Bible in his hand—is immediately discouraged, I always think.
As we discuss this book verse by verse, we shall see that the same message, already brought forward in the first chapter, remains. All sorts of arguments and circumstances are considered. All sorts of works that man brings about, and even all sorts of works that the Preacher himself has done. Of them he says: it serves no purpose. It is enjoyable to do, but that is all.
This great philosopher—Solomon, “the Preacher” of verse 1, regarded as almost the wisest man in the whole Bible—says in effect: you can walk around it from every side and look at it, but it remains simply empty. Such is existence.
Side note 1: The name Abel is the same word as used here and translated “vanity” (Strong H1892).
“Philosophy” is what we call “wisdom”. Philosophy seeks answers to the well-known questions of life. It seeks the meaning of existence. What are we doing here? How should we give content to our lives? But in this way one does not come to Christ. Paul says in Colossians 2:8:
Colossians 2:8
Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.
So it does not lead to Christ. In practice they are “the wiles of the devil”.
Ephesians 6:11
Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.
Our modern philosophy has arisen from the philosophy that already existed in those days. The great philosophers were the Greeks of antiquity. Their teachings were of course known. In Acts 17 the apostle even quotes some of them during his preaching in Athens. But philosophy cannot give an answer to the questions of life. Perhaps it could, but then that would immediately be the end of all philosophy.
The real problem—and I will say that straight away at the beginning, in order at least to set you on the right track—is the pride of man. For in one way or another man has the notion that all sorts of things in life, in existence, even in nature and creation, are not in order. At the same time he has the notion that he must change them.
The (Christian) religious man often has precisely the same pride, and thus the idea that through him—with God’s help, for that is added to it—the world must be changed or improved. For instance, when it concerns the

environment or the condition of the nations. Then man imagines that he can improve circumstances in nature, creation, and the world. But you may forget that, for that is not what the Bible says. It says rather that it has no point at all. It does not lead to anything. It may perhaps bring about temporary changes. As man himself is a temporary phenomenon, so it does not remain. To bring about something lasting—there is absolutely nothing of that.

After that comes the call that one should not even trouble oneself to change things. That is not what man can do. He should abandon that proud idea. Instead he should be content with circumstances as they are. In them he should find his joy, his gladness. That is the thought, and it is repeatedly brought forward. It is, as it were, hammered into you throughout this book.

In evangelical circles I have never heard anything about Ecclesiastes; it is not addressed. In orthodox theology one says: “If you read the book of Ecclesiastes, you see how far a man can stray if he lets go of God.” In Bible commentaries one reads: “It is by Solomon, the son of David, king of Jerusalem. He was a wise man, so it must be him, though his name is not stated. He wrote it in the time when he was misled by his wife (or wives) and began to serve idols. That was a time when he was not strict about serving Jehovah. Then he fell into a deep depression, and afterwards wrote it all out.”

So they say he wrote all this when he was not entirely right before the Lord—by which they are effectively saying the book is not inspired, which is what it comes down to. Others even say outright that the book is not inspired. Some say it does not belong in the Bible at all, because it would not be from God, because it breathes such a totally different atmosphere from the rest of Scripture.

But the idea that we must bring something lasting into being, for which God created us and gives strength and help, I have not met anywhere else in Scripture.

I have never known otherwise. The whole notion of “we must get stuck in, change society, lift it up”, and all that sort of thing, is—according to the Bible—no sensible occupation. Scripture does not teach it, and history teaches us that it does not work that way either. We know the saying, “History teaches us that history teaches us nothing.” History certainly teaches us something, but people do not want to acknowledge it. What history teaches us is: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” saith the Preacher. But people will not learn that lesson, and so they persist—stubbornly, and above all proudly—in pursuing ideals that everyone finds desirable. I do as well. But of which one ought to know that one cannot attain them. In a world such as this, it is wholly impossible.

That is why God removes this whole old creation completely, to make room for a New Creation.

Isaiah 65:17

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.

Why does God do this? Very simply: the old creation cannot be improved. God uses it for a time—as a seedbed for a New Creation, and that is all.

The old creation does not get better. As believers, we ought to be conscious of this in our lives.
Our old man—yes, literally our body as well—belongs to this old creation. God uses that, for us (who are born again), as the seedbed for His New Creation, which comes forth out of the old. If we are conscious of these things, we will live accordingly. That is what this Book says again and again.
If you ask, “But what positive thing is there still to say from Ecclesiastes? What are we to do with this life if it leads nowhere and is pointless?” then the Preacher says (we shall come back to this later): it comes down to one thing—namely, that you take pleasure in the things with which you are occupied; that they give you satisfaction. Not for the result, but for being engaged in them. You must enjoy it.
What is the point of your holiday, really? What is the point of lying on the beach? None at all—but you enjoy it, don’t you? Otherwise you would not do it. Well then: that is it—enjoy it, today.
The problem is that we human beings, for some reason, tend to look toward tomorrow. Building today for tomorrow. I do not mean it literally; I mean the longer term, the future—which may not begin tomorrow, but perhaps only years from now. And then we feel we must work our way toward it. That means our whole life is aimed at what may one day become ours in the future. But that future may never arrive. It is always the present. That is so in the New Testament as well—especially in Hebrews. It is always today: we live today.
“Each day,” says an old saying, “hath enough of its own evil.” That is well known in the Christian world, because the phrase comes from the Bible. Matthew 6:34
Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.
Or this: “Yesterday is past. Today we live, and tomorrow the Lord will provide.” But the Lord provides today as well. Just the same. We ought to be thankful for what the Lord gives us today, instead of looking ahead to—and working at—tomorrow. Tomorrow never comes. Tomorrow too is “today.”
Before you know it, years lie behind you, and you can look back—and then you have to say: if only I had done this, if only I had done that. I once knew someone who said, “When I am 45–50, I’ll buy a campervan and travel the world.” He was 43, and died of cancer. That was the first funeral I ever had to take. That is the sort of thing you learn. It is pointless. Thou knowest not what a day may bring forth. It is pointless to be afraid of it; it is also pointless to have lofty expectations of it.
What does have point is to do today what you must do. Better still: what you want to do, and what you can do—so that today becomes a meaningful use of time. But whether it will “work out” for tomorrow… If only you have had a good day. That is all.
So we ought to live today with full commitment. That is in chapter 9. We shall speak of it later in Ecclesiastes. Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it “with thy might” (verse 10)—with full commitment.

New Testament teaching says the same. You should serve the Lord with all your might; you should do whatever you do with full commitment—not because it yields more results, but because it gives you greater satisfaction. That is what Scripture teaches. It says we should serve the Lord; it does not say we should do it grudgingly, or merely because "the Lord said it must be done." Yet some people think so and read that into it. Because it involves labour, trouble, patience, they think: I do not feel like it, but the Lord says I must, so I will.
But it was intended that we should serve the Lord "willingly".
1 Peter 5:2
Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;
We know plenty of people who do hard work with effort and endurance when they do not have to at all—they do it as a hobby. Two hundred kilometres skating from Leeuwarden to… Leeuwarden: is that "fun"? How much training it takes to be able to do it at all! Why do they do it? Because it gives satisfaction. Yet it "leads to nothing." That is how our whole life is: doing something with full commitment, simply because it is for ourselves—we enjoy it.
What is the point of making music? The world could do without it. It is simply enjoyable to do, and without full commitment it will not become music; so you must give yourself to it. There are many other things you can do simply because you find it beautiful to do. So it will be, in fact, with our whole life.
I say this for those who say, "Yes, I am a child of God, but I am only an ordinary carpenter—what can I do for the Lord?" Or, "I am only an ordinary housewife—what can I do for the Lord?" The Lord expects us to do what we do with full commitment—and therefore with enjoyment. That, in the end, is the message of Ecclesiastes. It remains true as long as this old creation lasts—and also in this New Testament age. For even where we, as children of God, as firstfruits of the New Creation, should serve the Lord, it ought to be with full commitment—because we want nothing else, and because it gives us satisfaction.
Will it improve the world or the creation? Not at all. It does contribute to eternal blessings which we shall receive. We are exercised by it; we grow up. But one of the things we, as children of God, ought to learn is precisely what the Preacher teaches: it is not about bringing something lasting, something beautiful, something elevating, into being here in this world. That is not the intention at all.
This lesson applies just as much to the unregenerate. This is the user manual that comes with the old creation. It comes to us through someone who has experience of it and has thought about it—someone who had the capacity to do so: this "son of David, king in Jerusalem," from verse 1.

Ecclesiastes 1:1
The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
The "son of David" here is Solomon, whom we know especially for his pursuit of wisdom.

The word “Preacher” is not really a wrong translation, but as it stands it always needs explanation, because we do not understand the function of that “preaching.” What is the purpose of preaching, even in our day? The improvement of the world? That the world takes it to heart? No—because the world goes where it came from: the abyss. Preaching that “goes out into the world” has as its aim to take people who are in (and of) the world out of that world—to “call them out”.

John 17:14

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

John 17:16

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

Hebrews 13 says:

Hebrews 13:13

Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.

That, in brief, is also the thrust of the Gospel. And the remarkable thing is that, if all proceeds as it should, we are usually thrown out by the world anyway.

The title of the Book is translated “Preacher”, but it really ought to be translated “one who calls out.” The idea of “out” is certainly present in the Hebrew, and also in the Greek form. It comes from the expression qāhāl in Hebrew—here translated “Preacher.” It does not mean that the man speaks loudly (though he may). It means first of all: he calls others out of something. He calls others to himself.

You can hear it in the sound: qāhāl. “To call,” in English. They may not write the “h” in, but they do pronounce it. “To ca-hall” is simply the Hebrew qāhāl. And the Greek form is familiar to us in the word ekklesia—the church, the assembly. The Greek verb is ek-kaleō: ek is “out,” and kaleō is “to call.” Put together, you are back at the English “to call.”

Calling someone to you—that is the purpose of all preaching. The point is: Go out; come here. Do not remain in the camp, in the world of men—in the sense: do not remain in man’s thinking, which strives for higher and better, for development and all such things; for power, in order to bring things to pass. That is the world.

People are occupied with what still must come, with development. It is no accident that the theory of evolution now lies at the foundation of all human sciences and all human thinking. Even when it has nothing to do with it, such a doctrine still surfaces.

What the Bible teaches—what the Preacher tells us, whatever “biblical preacher” it may be—is: do not be carried away by philosophy, by vain deceit, by “the tradition of men”.

Colossians 2:8

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

In short: “the wiles of the devil.”

Ephesians 6:11

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

The devil invented that himself; he deceived man with the thought that if he would only do his best, and eat the right food, he would ascend. That is “the gospel of the serpent”: the proclamation that man must be improved. Why not? He is not so good. Man must be improved—by man. But if you have to repair or improve something and your tools are faulty, you will not get far. If man, who himself is faulty, must improve the faulty man, you end up in a vicious circle. What is attached to our old man cannot be changed, and nowhere does the Bible say it will be. Man ought rather to enter into rest, and know that what must be done is done by God—upon the world insofar as necessary, but in any case upon us as individual believers.

Ecclesiastes 1:2–3
Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.
What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?
Only: do not adopt grand theories about it, for that leads to nothing. Enjoy today’s life, and be thankful for what you can do and may do, and do not ask whether it will be meaningful for the future. The point is: things are meaningful if we take pleasure in them. Beyond that, they have no meaning. That is what the Preacher says. This, in general, lies within reach for every one of us.
The whole thrust of this book is that we should step out of the whirlpool of life in the world—out of all those ideas that live in man and that people hold up to one another. Sadly, even in Christian circles. A great deal of preaching is simply the same as what the world teaches and does: worldly philosophy. We must do our best. We can make it. For tomorrow, for later—very horizontal: for society, for our local church, for our children, or for anyone else; or perhaps for others far away.
“Yes, but that’s useful,” people say. Certainly. But it must not be presented as though it depends on us. It truly does not. It is not important whether everyone can travel down a path that we have swept clean, and a course that we have plotted. That is not the point. The point is whether you and I do what we should do—and that is what we take pleasure in.
In our service to the Lord, under the New Covenant, in the New Creation, it is no different. For example, as to preaching the Word of God: the result of it is no concern of the evangelist whatsoever. That is not his work; it is what the Word of God does. Not the evangelist, but the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation.”

> Romans 1:16
> For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

The Word will do its work anyway. I once heard an old evangelist say that he believed—himself included—that evangelists in general suffer from an underestimation of the power of the gospel: they tend to think, “We must do it, with our methods and techniques,” whereas in reality it makes no difference at all. The point is the power of the Word, not the power of the one who speaks it.

We should, with full commitment—and therefore with gladness—do what we are doing. Whether it has “point,” whether it has results, whether it leaves something lasting, we do not know; and it matters little. Perhaps something in the short term—but it is always short. It disappears again.

Ecclesiastes 1:4
One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.
That is the drift of the whole story. You need only look at nature, at the most obvious natural processes, and you see it: one generation goes, another comes. One generation dies out; a new generation rises and begins all over again. There is always the same cycle. As for the earth: it remains. The earth stands. “For ever” does not necessarily mean “endlessly enduring,” for the earth will not remain forever; but as long as this old creation exists, the earth remains. Man arrives, and goes off again.
Paul writes of that:
1 Timothy 6:7
For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.
We came into this world with nothing; and when we go out, we can take nothing with us. The sayings outside the Bible are: “We are born naked,” and “A shroud has no pockets.”

Ecclesiastes 1:5–6
The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.
The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.
What you should learn is that all processes—nature, creation, everything under the sun—look like that, and no different. The sun rises and the sun sets; and then again. The wind goes south and north; it continually changes direction, yet “returneth again according to his circuits.”
You know not whence the wind cometh, saith the Lord Jesus in John 3, nor whither it goeth. But so it is; and so the Preacher mentions more things.
Ecclesiastes 1:7–9
All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.
All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.
Water flows to the sea, yet it does not fill—Scripture says so. The thought is that all those waters, which flow by streams and rivers into the sea, at some point return again to where they came from, and then the story begins anew. So it is throughout nature: a mere circuit.
And if you pause to consider what forces operate in nature, only to “serve nothing,” you grow weary of it: always the same, without final result—

never able to say, “Now it is finished; now something has been brought into being.” For that does not happen.
Then it becomes more inward: “the eye is not satisfied with seeing.” A man looks and looks, but never says, I have seen enough. And “the ear is not filled with hearing”: now I have heard enough; it is full; shut the door; it has reached its purpose.
So the Preacher says: however it appears, what keeps returning is not new; it has always been. It was there before; we have simply forgotten. What we devise and accomplish today will likewise be forgotten. If we are conscious of that, we stop of ourselves.
People call such thoughts negative and pessimistic. But they are not. They are reality.
Ask old people. They sit in those homes; they may no longer participate in society; they have been set aside, put out; obliged to retire at a certain age. If possible, you put them together, so they can talk. They look back on their lives. What remains of it? What was that life again? What did they do for all those years? Others did things. But what remains? What do they still know of it? What does humanity still know of it? They are forgotten before they die—and with them, their work too.
A hymn (166, “Grijp toch uw kansen” in the Joh. de Heer collection) says, in substance: nothing here lasts; everything, however beautiful, will one day pass away; but what is done out of love to Jesus retains its value and will remain. What the Lord does through us will remain. But if we take no pleasure in it, the Lord does not require it. We ought therefore to take pleasure in serving Him.

Ecclesiastes 1:10
Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.
Is there anything one could call new? The Preacher states: it has already been, in the ages that were before us. In the first place, this concerns man’s striving as such. The conclusion is that man has never changed. He always has the same ideals. He is always building the same things. Whatever comes about disappears again in the short term, and then the story simply begins over again.
The technical inventions of which we modern people are so proud may well have existed in the past too. That does not sit well with evolutionists, who suppose that in the future things will improve, or that new things will arise (even if it takes millions of years, since evolution is slow). But there are many things we know today that may well have been present long ago.
“The ages that were before us” are not limited to Adam through Solomon; there is time before Adam as well. In any case, Ecclesiastes 1:10 overturns the idea that in our day we are bringing something new into being. It simply is not so.
The drift of the passage is plain enough, as the next verse shows.

Ecclesiastes 1:11
There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.
“There is no remembrance of former things.” We forget it anyway. Whatever we know of earlier things, we know because we have dug up a few fragments—and those very fragments prove that there is no “remembrance” left. It is gone, whatever it was. Whatever was built, and however impressive, it disappears.
Of both “former things” and things to come—“with those that shall come after”—there will be “no remembrance.” That is very discouraging. For it means that if we imagine we are bringing something into being, it too will pass away. It is written here in black and white.
With these discouraging words the Preacher calls us out of that world in which people think they must build something—or out of that religious world in which people think God wants us to build something. It is precisely the same folly.
After that, the Preacher presents himself.

Ecclesiastes 1:12–13
12 I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem.
13 And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.
From a king you may expect that he would “search out by wisdom.” Those who possess power ought to have wisdom and understanding. To “search out… all things that are done under heaven” applies to us as well—“the sons of man.” We are born “ignorant.” I do not mean that we have no intelligence, but rather that there is nothing yet to think about: we have no information, we know nothing. What we then do is take notice of things, consider them, and “learn to deal with them,” as we would say today. We must learn to cope with circumstances. We must learn, in practice, to make our choices in life: what suits us and what does not. All of that has to do with wisdom.
When we arrive at what we call philosophy, it naturally concerns the question of what is most important in life—what one should pursue first, what the highest aim of man’s life ought to be. That is what philosophy concerns itself with.
Later the apostle Paul concerns himself with it too—very briefly, and I rather like that. We have a book of about 1200 pages said to be the Word of God. One ought surely to find the highest wisdom and thus philosophy there. Yet when philosophy is addressed—even when the word itself is used—it is simply called “vain deceit”: that is, a crafty diversion. In Colossians 2 it is immediately described as an instrument of the devil. But the one time philosophy is really engaged with—Acts 17—Paul is quickly finished with it.
Paul is in Athens, the capital of the scientific world, of the philosophical world built on Greek philosophy. People meet in the marketplace to discuss whether there are new ideas, whether there is anything new in

philosophy. Some of the Epicureans and some of the Stoics disputed with Paul about the philosophical question: what is man's highest goal?

> Acts 17:18
> Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

One party (the Epicureans) says that one should pursue pleasure—that is, one's own enjoyment. The other (the Stoics) says: no, forget all that; it is all emotion. What matters is virtue: holding to certain principles and laws, and pursuing them. This is the most important opposition we also encounter in the Bible—really from the first page onward.

What the Stoics say corresponds most to "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." What the Epicureans say—that it is about one's own enjoyment—corresponds to "the tree of life." Paul does not argue on their terms. The striking thing is that he brings the two together, but on a far higher level, when he says:

> Acts 17:26–27
> And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;
> That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

So Paul says that the most important thing in life is that we should seek the Lord. That seems very difficult, and in some passages it is presented as difficult; but he says nevertheless that the Lord is not far from every one of us. When we seek the Lord, that Lord will make Himself known—really that is how simple it is. We find Him, not because we search so well, but because the One we find reveals Himself in His Word.

In that way those two chief categories of philosophy—two great streams so opposed to one another—are brought together. When we find the Lord, we come to rest: we find our well-being, our peace and joy, our satisfaction, whatever name you give it. And if we find the Lord, we will also submit ourselves to certain principles under which we live. Yet that is not law; it is grace, with all its consequences. Then we live under principles that rule over us—not sin and not the law, but grace reigning, together with all that grace works in our lives. And in that we do indeed find well-being.

What we seek in our lives can be brought back to this simple gospel proclamation: all that man needs, all that he seeks, he finds in the Lord Jesus Christ—who "is made unto us wisdom."

> 1 Corinthians 1:30
> But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

And in Him "are hid all the treasures of wisdom."

> Colossians 2:3
> In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

A few verses later comes the warning:

Colossians 2:8
Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

The Preacher searched for the meaning of existence—the question that lies beneath all philosophy. He says it is a hard and heavy occupation, "this sore travail" that God has given to the sons of man, to be exercised in. It indeed brings trouble and sorrow.

The problem is that people usually do not set the question high enough. In truth one does not need to search for the meaning of existence at all if one turns to Him who is "above the sun." There are many things you can learn in advance—not from experience, but because they are revealed in the Word of God. Without that… I shudder at the thought. I cannot imagine life without the Word of God. If I seek anything now—if I want to know something—I find it in the Bible. That is far easier, and it concerns the most important things in life. It teaches us what is most important: things pertaining to eternity. That is what Scripture reveals. It is enough to live from that—and enough to bear the disappointments life brings. I mean that with full conviction.

Without what is above the sun, man has here a miserable, heavy—indeed a "sore"—travail.

Paul says what he would do: seek the Lord.

Hebrews 11:6
But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Scripture also says that "there is none that seeketh after God"—

Romans 3:11
There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

—but that passage speaks of seeking truth in the sense of absolute truth. If one seeks that truth, one finds the Lord. God reveals Himself as the Lord —who indeed is the Truth, and says so of Himself.

Ecclesiastes 1:14–15

14 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

15 That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

The activities we occupy ourselves with—"the works that are done under the sun"—are "vanity and vexation of spirit." For, says verse 15, "that which is crooked cannot be made straight." He observes that much in the world is crooked. "Crooked" is injustice. There is much injustice in the world, much that is crooked. And "that which is wanting"—what is not there, what ought to have been there—"cannot be numbered": that is, it cannot be added in so that it counts, so that things become complete after all.

Everything under the sun is incomplete and crooked. We can do nothing about it; we cannot add what is lacking.

Yet the LORD has promised that the crooked will be made straight:

> Isaiah 42:16
> And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them.

Here, where the subject is the New Covenant and the New Creation, the Bible does not speak of “adding what is wanting” in the old creation; but what we read in the New Testament about “perfection in Christ” does have to do with what is lacking being supplied—perfection being reached. Yet not in this old creation, but in a New Creation. Not by the works of man, but by the work of God—and man ought to concern himself with that. Here on earth there is injustice; things are crooked and much is lacking, and you will not set it right. You cannot eradicate injustice. You may try to restrain it or hinder it, but eradication is not on the table. The imperfection of man will never become perfection. As far as the crooked is made straight, it is done by the Lord Jesus Christ, by the work of God. It is His work. He is at work in us as individual believers, and also in the creation—ultimately issuing definitively in a New Creation, where this old creation will no longer have any place.

> Revelation 20:11
> And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

So the idea that we must fight injustice here in the sense of eradicating it, or that we must realise perfection on earth, is really absurd. Anyone who does not believe it will, in time, discover that it does not work.

Ecclesiastes 1:16–17

16 I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.

17 And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

The Preacher sought wisdom—and what did he find? Folly. What is man occupied with? With things that are pointless; with striving after ideals that are absolutely unattainable. In all that he saw he found madness and folly. Examples are plentiful. As long as man does not look beyond the sun—figuratively speaking—he is busy only with nonsense. He may package it “intelligently” to mask the nonsense—“a shew of wisdom”—

> **Colossians 2:23**
> Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

—but that is how it goes, and that is what is being said here. In other words: you may search for wisdom and knowledge in the world, but you will not find it; it does not exist there.

How does man get the idea that there must be wisdom and knowledge? The biblical answer is: because man knows it must exist. That is the function of conscience—though “conscience” is not the best word; “shared knowledge” would be better. The thought is that God knows, and we have received something of that knowledge—call it in our nature, in our “conscience,” as the Bible speaks. We naturally recognise certain concepts, and we go searching to give those concepts content in practical life.

We search for love, for instance. We know it ought to exist; we have some idea what it is; we cannot truly define it; but it must be real. God is love—that is where you find it. But not here under the sun. True life—loving, loving deeply, and praising—is where one sees Jesus; not down here, but above the sun. So what man seeks in this realm he can indeed find—but not here, not “under the sun,” says Solomon. That man goes looking for wisdom is woven into human nature itself.

According to verse 17, this searching for wisdom and knowledge is “vexation of spirit.” At any rate, he “perceived” it. In verse 18 he adds a concluding statement.

Ecclesiastes 1:18

18 For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

He that increases knowledge increases sorrow. The more you know about things under the sun, the more grief you will have. The more news you consume, the more misery comes at you. Sometimes I think: if only we did not have the so-called blessings of modern communication—we would not even know, and perhaps we would be happier. Not those who suffer; but if we know of their suffering, does that lessen their suffering? Does it change anything? “Shared sorrow is half sorrow,” they say—but that is only true when you are with one another.

In any case, the text says plainly: “in much wisdom is much grief,” and he that “increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.”

It is certainly not biblical that we must be informed about everything happening in the world. We are not responsible for it. We are, first of all, responsible for our own life. Sometimes I think many people seek misery far away, so that they do not have to face their own.

With that we have reached the close of what I call the first section of this book. Ecclesiastes can be divided into several units, each ending with a conclusion. The conclusion of the first unit is: the crooked and what is lacking cannot be corrected, and wisdom and knowledge bring grief and sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 2

Chapter 2 is the second unit in my division, running to verse 11. In my Bible the heading reads: “Mirth and riches bring no happiness.” Someone else supplied that heading, but at least you now know the theme.

Ecclesiastes 2:1–3

1 I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore

enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity.
2 I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?
3 I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.

Ecclesiastes 2:4–8
4 I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:
5 I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits:
6 I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees:
7 I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me:
8 I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.
From verse 4 through verse 9 the other side of the story is shown. Solomon not only became immensely wealthy; he also brought various things into being—real estate, certainly. His reputation was widely known throughout the world. The queen of Sheba came to see for herself and said:

> 2 Chronicles 9:6
> And she said to the king, It was a true report which I heard in mine own land of thine acts, and of thy wisdom:
> 2 Chronicles 9:7
> Howbeit I believed not their words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and, behold, the one half of the greatness of thy wisdom was not told me: for thou exceedest the fame that I heard.

If we consider Solomon’s glory, wealth, and wisdom—not merely the outward things—then the man achieved a great deal in his life.

Ecclesiastes 2:9–10
9 So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.
10 And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.
What Solomon achieved is extraordinarily impressive, yet he says it all leads to nothing. Of all those works, nothing remains. Of Solomon’s palace and all that belonged to it, nothing can be found. By biblical standards they must have been among the greatest works in human history, yet we cannot even form more than a notion of them—they are gone. Not only has the man vanished “as grass,”

> 1 Peter 1:24
> For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away:

but his works have vanished too. So it did not have so much point.
Halfway through verse 10 comes the conclusion of this second unit: “for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion.” That is: this was what fell to me; this is what I kept from it. The only thing “all my labour” produced was not the outcome, not the finished product, but simply the joy of being engaged in it—the joy of building, of laying things out. Joy for himself; not even for others, though he may have thought he was doing it for others. But he says: it makes no difference. What I retained was my joy, because of my labour. “This was my portion of all my labour.” That is all.
Simply: find pleasure in what you do—with drive, with your whole person, with full commitment; doing things “with all thy heart”—

> Matthew 22:37
> Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

—that is where the wisdom lies, if you seek wisdom. To do the things of your life with full commitment, with your whole being, because that gives satisfaction in that very moment: you are engaged in something good—not only with your hands, but with your whole self.

Ecclesiastes 2:11
11 Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.
The outcome of “all the works that my hands had wrought” Solomon regarded, in any case, as “vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” He had made all those things—and that is no small matter—looked at them, and said in effect: that is that; it stands there; and yet… nothing more.
People constantly run into the disappointment that they reach what they have striven for. Was that it, then? Yes—that was it. End of the story. Nothing further. That is not pessimistic; it is realistic. Life under the sun is no different.
When what you are building is finished—and of course it must be finished—what then? What is the point? Well: that you enjoy doing it. Whether you are satisfied with it yourself or not. What others think of it is a different matter.
For us as children of God it is the same principle, only in a higher form: it is not about what others think of it, but what the Lord thinks of it. Better still: it is not about what others think of us, but what the Lord thinks of us. That alone truly counts, because it is measured by an unchanging standard—by a righteous God.
So the point, and the conclusion to remember—the first time we meet it here in Ecclesiastes 2, verses 10–11—is that our portion in our labour is the joy of our labour.
Solomon concludes that the meaning of human existence lies in the fact that a man finds his joy—and with it rest and peace—in the things he occupies himself with. He concludes that life under the sun has no goal in itself; that is, it does not lead to some final end that one will eventually

attain. Life is not an accumulation of labour that must lead to a final result. For as far as such a result exists at all, it disappears within a short time.
We ought to understand human life as such—and especially our own. Much depends on what is in our heart: how we think, how we view things. And the Preacher helps us with that. He goes before us in it.
Personally, I think that for someone with little life experience it is hard to take in what is being set forth here—not because it is intellectually difficult, but because people are often unwilling to accept what the man is bringing forward. For those who have some life experience, it is a great reassurance that not only they, but the Preacher—and thus the Bible—says that man is not all that much.

Ecclesiastes 2:12
12 And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.
Solomon looked around to see wisdom, but what he saw was “madness, and folly,” says verse 12. He had already said as much earlier. Now he begins to explain what he saw this time, and the question is: what can the man who comes after the king do? What has been done cannot be done again—that is the first thought.
It is clearly a reference back to verse 4 and what follows, where the Preacher pointed to the great works he had done—more than all in Jerusalem before him, even more than David. It has all been done already. The problem is that each new man wants to do it differently, with his own stamp, his own character. If the best has already been, there is no honour left to win. That is the problem. It is the idea behind it: once something is developed, it reaches a limit, and after that it stops. If you then go beyond that limit, it only becomes worse. That is how all “development” in this old creation works.
What can you paint after Rembrandt? There is simply nothing to improve. He reached the summit, and what follows are only imitators and pupils. That is very awkward for all who came after him. That is the idea of verse 12.
Or take Alexander the Great, as an example among kings: he conquered more or less the whole world of his day. What was left to do after that? An Alexander the Great was no longer there, and in fact there was nothing left to conquer. The only thing that could happen was that the whole empire would fall apart—and that is exactly what happened.
In culture or civilisation there is always a certain development. Then it reaches a certain level and, logically, decline sets in. It cannot go further. Because man insists he must still “advance,” he begins to tear down—because there is nothing left to build.
Verse 13 is the run-up to a new climax in this passage.

Ecclesiastes 2:13–14
13 Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.

14 The wise man’s eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.

The fool has no eyes in his head, so to speak. On the one hand you have people who see what is happening around them. They observe, learn their lessons, and roughly know what they are doing—what direction they are going. They can see a little further. Their eyes are open; they look carefully around. They have learned—perhaps from the previous generation, from parents, or from what they see happening to others. They draw conclusions from it, and they likely have fewer disappointments to process, because they have already seen it in others.

And of course there are also people who see nothing. They barge straight through life. They simply follow whoever is walking in front of them. When they discover that leader is heading the wrong way, it is too late. Such a person “walketh,” as it were, in darkness.

If I must choose, I would rather see where I am walking, where the path leads in life, and learn at least something from others.

“Wisdom” means knowing how to deal with the things that inevitably happen in life. Wisdom is practically applied knowledge—insight into circumstances, by which one finds one’s way through life. That is wisdom, and this principle applies to unbelievers and believers alike.

In the New Testament—and thus within a New Creation—you find the same principle, only set on a higher level. The principle remains the same, though the application differs. Children of God also ought to be wise: to walk in the light; to know Christ, “who is made unto us wisdom.”

> 1 Corinthians 1:30
> But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

And in Him “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

> Colossians 2:3
> In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

And Scripture says we should walk in the light:

> 1 John 1:7
> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

If we walk in the light, we move through life more freely, more broadly. If we know the Lord, we move more easily through life—because we understand the circumstances, we know what to do with them, and we know we have a Lord in heaven who cares for us.

Many Christians do not live that way, but that is because they live under the law. That restricts their life and their liberty: they may not do this, may not do that; they must do this and that. That is not walking in the light.

Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness—that needs little explanation. Practically applied: “The wise man’s eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness,” and thus he blunders and stumbles everywhere. Where the wise man can step over obstacles, the fool only realises they are there once he has already tripped over them.

But then the Preacher adds: “and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.” In the English Bible this “event” is the word often

used for “chance”; more neutrally: “lot.” If “the event” is unfavourable, we call it a mishap.
“One” means the same kind: wisdom or folly is not ultimately decisive for someone’s life. To some extent it is, because it has influence; yet, he says, there is too much that simply “happens.” In other words: a man, despite his wisdom, does not have his lot in his own hand and cannot control it. So wisdom still leads you to this insight.
Eventually the Preacher puts it bluntly: whatever happens to man, he dies. Whether wise or foolish, he dies.
In any case, he says here—and later more than once (so we will return to it)—that a man’s goodwill, or wisdom, or ability, or aptitude is not ultimately decisive for his lot; not for his life as such, and certainly not for what he achieves. It depends too much on what he calls “chance.”
This is problematic for many Christians, because many say they do not believe in chance. Yet the Bible says it exists. (See study no. 73: “Guidance and Lot”.) It is, to a high degree, determinative for our lives. How far we get is not determined by what we can do, but by what we cannot do: that is our boundary, as the following chapters will show.
The Lord gives us space; and in practice that means He gives us space to do things we should not do; to walk paths we should not walk; to hold views we should not hold; to believe things we should not believe—and conversely, not to believe things we should believe. How far that space extends relates directly to our heart and to the nature of our being.
Some must learn things in practice. They need much room; otherwise they do not learn—so God gives room. Others never learn from practice, and God gives them no room. The issue is always whether our heart is sincere: toward the Lord under the New Covenant, but also in this old life under the sun, the same principle holds. God expects sincerity from man—that is, honesty.

Ecclesiastes 2:15–17
15 Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.
16 For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.
17 Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.
“As it happeneth”—that is, the “event,” the lot, the chance. His conclusion was: even this is vanity, because wisdom is a very relative thing. One needs more of it than another, but even here it is vanity, for “there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever.” No more remains of a wise man than of a fool. They are forgotten—that is the general truth—because “that which now is… shall all be forgotten.” That was already stated in chapter 1 from verse 9 onward.
And then: “the wise man” dies “as the fool.” It simply ends. And then you see how relative it all is—and the Preacher grasped that.

Ecclesiastes 2:18–19
18 Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me.
19 And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.
Here the Preacher reaches back to verse 4 and what follows. He made these works by his wisdom, and he says: wisdom turns out not to be much after all, because it too ends. Then the pleasure is gone at once. All the beautiful things I made, with all my wisdom, I must “leave… unto the man that shall be after me.”
The thought that my goods will go to others—for whom they may mean little or nothing—while for me they were worth a great deal, is unpleasant. That is what he is speaking of. It is about leaving things to someone who receives them in his lap, has done nothing for them, and you can only wait to see what he will make of them.
“Who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?” But whether wise or foolish, he “shall have rule over all my labour… This is also vanity.” Where did we get the idea that we must labour now in order to leave something for our children? Our Western culture is built around it. The ultimate argument is that our children will have a better future. Yet the next generation, as a rule, wants nothing of what the older generation produced. That is generally how it works, is it not?
It is a proud thought that we must build the world, society, or civilisation for the sake of the future of those who come after us. We live today. And if we want to do something for our children today, it should be this: teach them to live today. We demonstrate it for them, so that they see in us how it is done. We give an example—that is the best thing you can pass on. They can fall back on it later, and learn to value it.

Ecclesiastes 2:20–21
20 Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.
21 For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.
First the Preacher was glad that such joy can be found in labour as such (verses 10–11). Now, through other thoughts—namely that the next generation will probably make nothing of it—he comes to despair over all his labour under the sun.
That first clause in verse 21 could even be rendered as a question: is there a man whose labour is in wisdom and knowledge and skill? Someone else gets control over the things that cost you much effort and that are of great value. And I do not mean only material things, but spiritual matters too—for example, life experience. If such things are of little or no value to others, that hurts us. That is why it is written this way.
Whatever a man brings to pass, he must leave it behind, for the familiar reason: you cannot take it with you. The vanity lies in this: the man

disappears, and everything that had value he effectively takes with him—afterwards it is gone. “This also is vanity and a great evil.”
And then comes the question:

Ecclesiastes 2:22
22 For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?
This concerns wise people who trouble themselves about something, who with all their strength, conviction, and effort try to achieve something for themselves in their own life. That others may benefit is true enough, but that is not the primary point here. The point is: what is the result? What does a man actually get “of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart”? What does it yield?
Practical-minded people might say: if the Preacher puts up all those buildings and lays out those gardens, then builders and gardeners have income for a while. True—but that is not the point. The issue is the end of it: what is the outcome?

Ecclesiastes 2:23
23 For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.
This shows that the heart truly has to do with thinking. Have you ever lain awake at night because you wanted something settled, wanted to get something done? You do not know how, but you would so like it to succeed. Yet the text says: this too is vanity—because what does it produce?

Ecclesiastes 2:24
24 There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.
I would not translate this verse as a question. It is simply a conclusion: there is nothing better for man than that “he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour.”
You can reason: what will come of it? To whom will I leave it, and what will they do with it? I have been wise, yet I will die like the fool. What is the point of life? The conclusion is: let a man eat and drink—that is his daily practical life (“his soul”)—and let him enjoy the good, not chiefly in idleness, but the good in his labour.
And I am grateful for the answer he himself gives: “This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.” In other words, it is established—by the Preacher himself—that man should enjoy the good in eating and drinking and in his labour; not so much in the result of his labour, but especially in the doing of it. For that comes “from the hand of God.” The Preacher says: God gives us that.
Questions about what comes after us are not our responsibility. Rather, we should do things with full commitment and enjoy them. Again, this is the conclusion—and it will be repeated many times throughout this book. It is a theme that also appears in the New Testament.

1 Timothy 6:17
Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy;

So we truly should enjoy them, because God gives them for that purpose —because they are “from the hand of God.” It may seem to clash with common Christian notions, but this is what Scripture teaches.

Ecclesiastes 2:25

25 (For who can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto, more than I?)

This is still about “eating and drinking,” which in fact reaches beyond eating and drinking. It is about taking pleasure in life as such. A man ought, in the first place, to enjoy for himself (“more than I”) the fruit of what he does and what he occupies himself with. That, too, is a recurring theme in the New Testament, especially in the Epistles.

Ecclesiastes 2:26

26 For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

“God” is written with a capital because verse 26 reaches back to the end of verse 24: “This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.” And then immediately: “For God giveth…”.

To which man does God give wisdom, knowledge, and joy? Which man is “good in his sight”? By God’s standards no one is good.

Romans 3:12
They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.
Psalm 14:3
They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Yet the believer is accounted good before the face of God, because of his faith. God expects no more from man—and no less either, because a man can believe, if he will. But a man cannot keep the law—whether he wants to or not makes no difference.

God expects that man will submit, with his spirit, heart, and mind—his thinking—to what God has spoken; and of course that he lives out of it. We are not speaking merely of philosophy or theory, but of practical daily walk. Faith is practical. Faith is living out of what God has spoken.

God has evidently ordered it so that it is good for man that he eat and drink—namely, that he make his soul enjoy good in his labour. It is no more complicated than that. The only problem, and the reason people object to these sorts of statements, is simply that man is far too proud. Man imagines that his presence on earth and in this life must be of great importance for all mankind, and preferably contribute to the future and prosperity of the next generation. He wants to establish something lasting. Why that is so will be told in the next chapter, so I shall return to it.

For us there remains nothing else but “eating and drinking,” and “making our soul enjoy good in our labour”—even when that labour is “for the Lord,” I add for the sake of clarity, because many draw a sharp line there. They say: the one is the old man, the other the new man; the old creation—flesh—over against spirit, the new creation. But it is not like that. A believing man is such in the practice of life. What is true for all occupations is also true for service to the Lord.

It cannot be otherwise, because all our occupations ought to be in service to the Lord. How? By enjoying them and doing them with full devotion. As the New Testament says:

> Colossians 3:23
> And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;

The distinction between earthly life and serving the Lord does not exist as a separation. It is one whole. We have one life, and our whole life was meant to be to the glory of God. What the natural man cannot do as a sinner, the believing man can indeed—when his heart is filled with the Word of God. In New Testament terms: the born-again man.

Proverbs teaches:

> Proverbs 9:10
> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.

We should “fear” the Lord—that is, know Him, take account of Him, take Him seriously, even in practical life. Then, on the one hand, He gives us that we may—with joy—enjoy life; and on the other hand He gives wisdom and knowledge, which are necessary for finding rest. Ignorance makes a man uncertain, and uncertainty makes him restless. Where there is unrest and no certainty, there is no joy.

That is why the children of God are exhorted to rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances:

Philippians 4:4
Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.

> 1 Thessalonians 5:16
> Rejoice evermore.

Because we have certainty and peace with God, we know who we are. We know where we are going, because we know God—because we know the Lord Jesus Christ—and are conscious of our position in Him. That gives peace and joy, and therefore creates the very possibility of enjoying the life we have here. That is what the New Testament sets before us. More strongly still: this is what God will call us to account for. A few pages further on it is stated, and we will meet it in due course.

If we have not found joy in it, that undoubtedly proceeds from the fact that we did not know Him—literally, as I say it: that He made no real part of our life; that we knew Him at most as a kind of theory with which we did not truly reckon. Then you do not get any real pleasure in life.

God gives “wisdom and knowledge” because the Preacher says many times in this book that he sought wisdom (for instance, “I turned myself…” in 7:25). Such wisdom and knowledge may have been gathered with much

effort, but the Preacher puts it in proportion by saying: it is what God gives. God gives wisdom. God gives knowledge. (See Proverbs 8.) Man needs wisdom; he needs knowledge. He must know the Lord. He must know his own relationship with the Lord. He must know where he stands before God, and therefore where he stands in the world. If you know the Lord, you know His realm, and you know how to go on living. These things belong together.

People are inclined to investigate; they want to know. If they have few problems with the world, have a place in it, and are content with it, then they usually do not feel much need to know the Lord. It is also bound up with a man's nature, attention, and intelligence. But when one seeks the Lord, He reveals Himself—that is well known, for if there is a God, it is absurd to think He has not made Himself known. He communicates; He makes Himself known.

God has given us understanding so that we might know Him that is true:

> 1 John 5:20
> And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.

So I always end up with the Bible; it is simple enough. It is the only Book in the world that claims to be the Word of God. If one seeks the Lord, He reveals Himself, makes Himself known. That has always been so, and it is so now. Though He has "given them up" (Romans 1:18ff), and though He hides His face from mankind in general and from Israel in particular, it remains true that He makes Himself known to those who seek Him. If we want to know Him, He makes Himself known to us; He begins to teach us. Then we ought to yield ourselves to Him.

What happens in practice is that this living Word of God—never underestimate it—is planted in our hearts:

> James 1:21
> Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

It develops there, also in the practical life of our soul—our walk. That is the result of the Word we receive. God gives wisdom and knowledge, and with it "the good" (v. 24), and therefore joy (v. 26). It begins with submission to Him—certainly not with the pursuit of our own honour or anything of that kind. Humility and lowliness give Him room to do His work in us. That is what He gives.

> Philippians 2:13
> For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

If it is not God's will at work in us, there is no point in forcing anything. God's will is brought about in us through the indwelling of His Word, because we know Him. Whether what follows is "our will" or "the Lord's will"—I do not know the difference, and no one can truly draw that line. It will be made plain afterwards.

We should live, walk, act, and do from the heart. Yes, that can create chaos—if the heart is empty. But the condition is that the heart be filled with the Holy Ghost: with the life of Christ, with the Word of Christ. Then nothing will go wrong. We must learn to live—not under imposed regulations, for there a man never finds his joy; he only becomes frustrated. We should not live under the law, but out of grace—out of what God plants within us. And for that we must give Him room.

Both “to will” and “to do” is not our will with the Lord merely giving strength to execute our own plans. No: the Lord gives us the willing, and He works the doing, “of his good pleasure.”

> Philippians 2:14
> Do all things without murmurings and disputings:

“Disputings” is literally “talking back,” “contradicting,” or “arguing together.” If God works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure, then we should not start conferring with others about whether we will do it, or whether it is desirable, or whether we are doing it right. We should simply do it. We must make ourselves available.

> Romans 12:1
> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

That is all: be willing to submit. Then we shall prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God for our lives.

> Romans 12:2
> And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

To “prove” is inward: you must first take it in, then learn to value and understand it. In studying the Bible we must not presume to know better than Scripture itself. We must always be ready to submit to Scripture, and therefore to adjust our own ideas. That is a life posture of faith and humility. There we find satisfaction. Nothing gives such joy, peace, and certainty as serving the Lord.

What should man do? Seek God. And what does he find then? He finds the Lord—and with Him the good, joy, gladness, wisdom, knowledge: in short, everything man naturally seeks but cannot find “under the sun.”

So God gives to the man “that is good in his sight.” But to the sinner He gives travail—to gather and to heap up. And then comes the striking turn: “that he may give to him that is good before God.” A man may gather much, but he must give it up—he dies. The inheritance remains; but where does the final inheritance go? It ends up with the one who outlives him.

What men gather ultimately comes into the hands of the believers. Even now God gives us what we need, also in material things. Wherever He takes it from, it comes out of the old world, whose prince is Satan.

> Ephesians 2:2
> Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:

Yet the Lord uses it. That is no new thing: God makes “all things… work together for good” for those who love Him.

> Romans 8:28
> And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Otherwise, of course, you have no benefit from it.
So either we have the toil “to gather and to heap up”—which is also “vanity and vexation of spirit”—or God gives us what we truly need: wisdom, knowledge, joy; making our soul enjoy good, instead of emptiness and the vexation of our thoughts.

Ecclesiastes 3
The heading above this chapter reads: “To every thing there is a season.”

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8
1 To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
3 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
6 A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
7 A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.
This “to every thing there is a season” is a famous passage, known even to many unbelievers—just like “a time to be born, and a time to die.” Here many concepts that are complete opposites are set side by side. It is said that, however opposite these things are, in their time they are all good. That is striking, and it cuts across the mindset of law—because law says: this is good, that is not; do this and do not do that.
But the Preacher says here that certain things under certain circumstances are indeed not good; yet when circumstances change, they may very well be good. Whether something is good or evil depends on the circumstances—“the time,” as we say, and as it is written. “Time” by itself is nothing; it is about events and conditions—what is going on. That determines whether we should do something or refrain.
So there is a time to be born and a time to die—both are good in their time. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what was planted—anyone with a garden knows that. There is even a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to keep silence and a time to speak. All depends on circumstances. There is even a time of war and a time of peace. The point is: the most opposite things can, in the right circumstances, be good; and

conversely, things that generally seem good can in certain circumstances be evil—because it is not the time for them.
One of life's secrets is recognising that "time"—those circumstances—and seeing the opportunity to make use of it. If you do not, you let the favourable moment pass.
After this list through verse 8, the Preacher concludes:

Ecclesiastes 3:9–10
9 What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?
10 I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.
This repeats what we have seen before. Man keeps asking what the use of his work is. At bottom that is the root question of all philosophy: what is the point of life? Mankind occupies itself with it, and God has arranged it so that by it one should come to God.

Ecclesiastes 3:11
11 He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.
All things in life, all occasions, are in themselves "beautiful" when they occur under the right conditions and at the right time. In themselves, things are not automatically reprehensible or condemnable; it depends on circumstances.
That is why I find it strange that in our day people tend to judge events—often from decades ago—by the light (or rather, the darkness) of our present day and our current ways of thinking. It makes no sense. It is not honest. People do things, think things, or come to conclusions and decisions under the circumstances they were in then. We look back and say: it was wrong. Human fuss is always wrong in one way or another—but the point is that we judge things under circumstances, and in that we must always be sincere toward the Lord—toward Him and toward ourselves. "He hath made every thing beautiful in his time."
You wrote: "The New Testament counterpart is found in…"—and that's where your text stops. If you paste the next lines (the verse reference and the sentence that follows), I'll continue the translation seamlessly.

> Romans 14:14
> 14 I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

In plain English: it is "in your head". It depends on how you look at it. In itself nothing is unclean. In itself everything is clean—provided it is set in the right circumstances. If it is about animals, different "circumstances" apply than for human beings. If among men things go as they do among animals, then you are dealing with godless, licentious people who have no regard for God or for commandment. They are at one another's throats; they devour one another. Among animals it may be "fine" in its place; among men it certainly is not fine. You must see it within proper proportion: under the right circumstances and in its time.

“He hath made every thing beautiful in his time.” We underlined “in his time”. It is not a matter of capital letters; it is a matter of those circumstances of which the first eight verses of this chapter speak by way of introduction. So you cannot simply condemn things and say, “This is not good,” or “It must be this way or that.” It depends on circumstances. In the New Testament we find the same principle.

For example, if the love of God is in us, we should “love the brethren”; yet on other occasions we are told to have an aversion—depending on who they are, what is at issue, and what the circumstances are. We must make those judgements. That is why law always falls short as a guide through life. Scripture says of the law that it was “weak and unprofitable.”

> Hebrews 7:18
> For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.

Immediately after that, Ecclesiastes says that God has set “the world” in their heart. It had been speaking of time and changing circumstances; and now it says that God has put something enduring within man, “so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” Over against the opposing realities here on earth, man nevertheless has awareness of imperishable things. I do not mean that he knows them, but that he has an idea that such things exist. That belongs to conscience. The thought is that conscience is a God-given instrument by which we have notions of imperishable things and of absolute concepts, and that this should accompany us all our lives.

The problem is that if a man applies this wrongly, he begins seeking things of lasting value in this present life. But he seeks in the wrong place, for those imperishable realities—of which we are meant to have some awareness—are not found under the sun but above the sun. By conscience, if it is not seared, people know that something like absolute truth ought to exist. Then they go searching; and if they restrict themselves to things under the sun, they will find no truth. Then it turns out that “everyone has his own truth”.

Man has “the world” (the sense of the eternal) in his heart—given by God, placed there. By “the world” is meant the boundless, the unlimited: not only in time, but also in the sense of unboundedness in space—the unconfined. Outside this bounded world there must be something else; man is meant to have some awareness of that. Yet it immediately adds: “so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” In other words: the unlimited exists, man knows it exists, but he does not know what it looks like, and he does not find it here on earth. If he finds anything, it is always only a fragment, or only an effect. A piece of truth may be found here; but truth as such—the whole truth—you do not find under the sun. People may come close, yet it remains far from us. It is not to be found.

Wisdom is such a concept too: something that must be found. What is wisdom? We do not know. We know it must exist; but ultimately you find wisdom only with God, with Christ. Of Him it is said:

> Colossians 2:3
> In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

And: Christ, “who… is made unto us wisdom.”

> 1 Corinthians 1:30
> But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

But if a man searches what happens under heaven, he sees all those opposing things, which in themselves are often neither to be rejected nor embraced absolutely; it depends under what conditions they occur. That makes it all so elusive, and life so complicated. It makes it hard to develop fixed patterns of behaviour—because all things have their time.

So God has given us conscience, so that we might seek the true content of concepts such as truth, wisdom, righteousness, love, and so forth. If we do that seriously, we do indeed find it—not because we are such skilful seekers, or on the basis of our own merit, for “no man can find out the work that God maketh”; but we find it because God sets it before us. It comes to us, in any case, through the preaching of the gospel. God Himself has these eternal things fixed, and He makes them known to those who seek Him in earnest. God reveals it to us.

In the New Testament this also appears:

> Romans 11:33
> O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!

That sounds very like: “so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” When the apostle writes, “how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out,” why does he write that after he has spent eleven chapters setting out those ways and judgements? Why the effort, if they cannot be known? Because man does not have to discover them by his own searching. Man has been given eleven chapters in which God Himself—here through the apostle Paul—reveals His ways and judgements. After unfolding them, the apostle says, as it were: “You see? A man cannot work this out for himself.” By studying nature or contemplating the world as such, one does not come to the knowledge that has just been revealed. God reveals Himself in His Word—in Scripture—and in the Person of our Saviour, because man is not able to investigate and trace out God’s judgements and ways by his own means. But nowhere does the Bible say that we cannot search the Bible. It says rather that we should. God’s ways are indeed unsearchable, but His Word is not. Only by studying His Word do we learn His ways—His plan, His work.

God has, however, built a kind of safeguard into Scripture: it is not possible simply to read a random passage and immediately understand it in isolation. What one must do is compare Scripture with Scripture. It is one whole. One must not imagine that one can focus on a single portion and understand it fully without knowing the rest of the whole.

Therefore we should turn to God in order to know Him.

> Isaiah 55:6
> Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near:

Then God reveals Himself—and with that, His work. But insofar as man tries to seek God here under the sun, here on earth, in human activity, the

Preacher says one finds nothing. So one may as well stop. That is the same conclusion and thrust throughout this book, whether one likes it or not. Seeking the work of God in this world is pointless. If you seek God in the world, you do not find Him; and then people conclude that God does not exist. That is the misunderstanding. One ought rather to ask: what has God said about it? Then one receives an answer at once—because God has revealed it.
The question here was not whether one can know there is a Creator. That can be known from creation, Romans 1 tells us. The question is whether one can know the work of God—His ways and judgements. That can be known, but only if one listens to what God Himself says about it; otherwise not.

Ecclesiastes 3:12–13
12 I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life.
13 And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.
In these things we should find our joy. That is God's gift. Man speaks negatively of it and says, "That is trivial." It is not; it is very wise. It is simply not flattering to man—and that was never the point. This is what we are responsible for, and that is that. For the rest we live out of what the Lord gives us: first spiritual food, and then also what we need here—generally not a great deal. Life is not more complicated than that. And at the end of the road it will no doubt be plain; but that is where the next part of this chapter is heading.

Ecclesiastes 3:14
14 I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.
The Preacher says that God brings a lasting work to pass. "Nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it." We may be involved in it; we may have a part in it. God does it so that "men should fear before him"—for that is the consequence. If there is a God who truly does an eternal work, to which we can add nothing and from which we can take nothing away, then only one thing remains: we must submit to Him—listen to Him, serve Him, fear Him.
Eating, drinking, and being cheerful is certainly not the opposite of fearing God. Some circles treat them as though they were total opposites, but they are not. On the contrary: it is profoundly Christian to submit to the Lord and to enjoy the things we have in life.
That is what this section has said. Verses 1–14 set out that on earth many things are opposites; in a sense they cancel one another out. In themselves they are good—provided they happen under the right circumstances. Beyond that, "eternal things" are the things God does. Everything else is temporary, of very limited value. What God does has eternal value, and man can neither add to it nor subtract from it. He

cannot invent it; he cannot meddle with it; he cannot get a finger into it. He can only listen—and there we should find our peace.
Now a new section follows, from verse 15 to the end of this chapter, which again ends with its own conclusion, as usual. In that portion it is set out that in the future God will judge man and the world. In the meantime there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works, “for that is his portion.”

Ecclesiastes 3:15
15 That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.
The Preacher says in verse 15 that nothing really changes. Outwardly things may change here and there—people dress differently, behave differently, have different tools, interact differently, hold different norms and values—but in essence it is still the same: the same man. We are Adam’s offspring by nature; we are in Adam by nature—and Adam was the same kind of man as you and I. The same man, with the same shortcomings and the same qualities. Therefore: “That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been.” Things come and go; it is the same story as in chapter 1. Men come and go, but it is the same humanity.
“And God requireth that which is past” is, as it were, the heading, for the thought is this: man may go, vanish, drift away—but God calls for what has slipped away. A man may die, but he does not get away with it so easily. Those who teach that death ends everything hope it is so. They talk themselves into it, even make it a life-principle: “with death it’s all over.” But it is not so, says the Preacher here—and his reasoning is simple.
The Preacher goes on to say: it may be that man disappears, but God “hath set the world in their heart” (v. 11)—and that is being built upon. God has put “the eternal” into man’s heart. These are imperishable, eternal, absolute realities. Man may vanish, but it cannot end there. If there is no justice done here, if man does not truly encounter justice in his life here, then he must yet come to know it. If man does not truly know love here—under the sun, not in lasting, absolute form—then he must yet come to know it. It cannot be otherwise. Man is God’s creature. God places those eternal things in man’s heart, in his conscience; yet man does not meet those realities in full in practical life here, because it cannot be here. The only conclusion left is that it must yet happen—and the Preacher simply states it.

Ecclesiastes 3:16
16 And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.
“Wickedness” is synonymous with injustice. Where God has no place, there is injustice by definition. “Judgment” and “righteousness” are two sides of the same thing. “That wickedness was there”—and “there” can be taken not only as place, but also as then: not merely location, but time.

Ecclesiastes 3:17
17 I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.
God will judge the righteous and the wicked, “for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.” Then it will be time indeed to judge the deeds and purposes—the thoughts—of men. Romans says the same in so many words:

> Romans 2:16
> In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.

Not only works, but what a man thought, planned, and intended; how he regarded things and evaluated them.

Ecclesiastes 3:18
18 I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.
If there is no justice—because that is the issue from verse 16—then man is no different from a beast. Animals have their “order” too, but there is only one “law” there: the law of the strongest. Among men it often works the same way, because true justice is based on truth. Legal judgement is bound up with finding what is true. But if truth cannot be found—because it is too difficult, or because people will not have it—then justice cannot exist either. If there is no justice here, it must yet be brought, and it will be.
If it were not so, then man differs from animals in nothing. For animals these concepts do not exist. They have no conscience, and they do not know what truth or justice is. Remove that, and you are left only with what we half-mockingly call “the survival of the fittest”—which Darwin then used as a basis for evolution: survival of the strongest. But man is not like the animals; everyone knows it. Some refuse to acknowledge it because they will not acknowledge God; so they reclassify man as a higher animal—hoping that with death everything is over.
“That God might manifest them” means God will bring them into the light—make it plain.

> 1 Corinthians 3:13
> Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is.

It is about bringing the truth to light so that justice may be done. God will deal justly with them and will show that “they themselves are beasts”—in themselves. If there is nothing more than man as he is now, then it is true: he is a beast, a creature of flesh. In themselves they are that—but they are not only that, because God still has an account to settle with them, precisely because “the world” (the sense of the eternal) is in their heart.

Ecclesiastes 3:19
19 For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have

all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.

In life it comes down to a few things: eating is one; and then, of course, the struggle against death—which we lose in advance. “A man hath no preeminence above a beast,” in this respect: they all die, and for all of them it is “vanity.” It is what was already said in Ecclesiastes 2:14: “one event happeneth to them all.”

Ecclesiastes 3:20

20 All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

“All go unto one place”—to death. They return to the earth from which they were taken: “all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.” The Preacher is describing how things look in the world. The unbeliever has no difficulty with it and says, “Yes indeed, that is how it goes.” And Genesis 3 says the same:

> Genesis 3:19
> In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Man, born of Adam, is “of the earth, earthy,” and returns to the earth. “Dust thou art,” and back to dust.

Ecclesiastes 3:21

21 Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

You understand it is not really about “breath”. Put “spirit” in its place—because that is what the verse itself does. The thought is simple: as far as the animals are concerned, they indeed disappear into the earth. Their life goes downward to the earth. Over against that stands that the spirit of the sons of men “goeth upward.” But, says the Preacher, you cannot see that; you do not observe it.

Ecclesiastes 3:22

22 Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

Therefore the Preacher concludes: “there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works”—in the work of today, in the present doing, in simply living—“for that is his portion.” That is what belongs to him, and, as we read earlier, that is what God gives “under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes 4

Above chapter 4 the heading reads: “The Evils of Oppression”—Our “Life is full of vexation and disappointment.” The thought is that one should not go through life alone; and in Ecclesiastes 4 the relationship between two who travel together is described. It is best not to walk alone, yet it is added that companionship brings its own difficulties. And the conclusion that follows is that one should go through life with God.

Ecclesiastes 4:1
1 So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.
With that, in one stroke, it is said that man should not go through life alone. Man ought to draw strength—and therefore comfort—from a companion, a mate, a fellow-traveller; and then come the conclusions that many people cannot follow.

Ecclesiastes 4:2
2 Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.
That is not such a difficult conclusion. If you focus on “all the oppressions”, you readily arrive at the thought that those who have already died are better off than those who are still being oppressed. People only object that it is “not Christian” to say such things, because it sounds so negative. Yet under certain circumstances we ourselves have exactly the same thoughts—and sometimes, afterwards, we say so as well.
If nothing more can be done—if someone is oppressed, in this case by illness—then it can be better that it comes to an end. It is honest to acknowledge that, and the Preacher does so here. If there is no prospect of improvement, if it can only get worse, then we say too: “That isn’t living.”

Ecclesiastes 4:3
3 Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.
That is the next conclusion: better not to be born at all—then you do not see all that misery, and you do not have to endure all that oppression. Of course it is a one-sided view of life; it is looking at particular circumstances. But if you assess those circumstances objectively, you can come to this conclusion—and finally even to the conclusion that you would be better off if you had never lived. Then you have never seen it, and you never have to see “the evil work” that is done under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 4:4
4 Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.
In verses 1 and 2 the Preacher looked at oppression and saw that people are oppressed, and he implies that the oppressed man ought to have a helper. Verse 4 says, in effect: suppose he does have a helper—look what happens then.
“Right work” here has the sense of skill, competence, craftsmanship: capable work a man does; he achieves something. And what does that bring him? If you are together, and you are good at what you do, what do you get? Jealousy, quarrelling, envy—“envied of his neighbour.” And it is

not envy from some random stranger; it is from his neighbour—his companion. “This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.”
The thought is: if you do your best, hoping to gain honour, recognition, appreciation for what you do because you do it so well—then, says the Preacher, you can forget it. They will simply become jealous; you gain an enemy. It gets you nowhere. Whatever you do, you will have enemies. If you have no companion, you can be crushed by oppression because there is no one to help you. If you do have one, you must watch out—he may become jealous. And what is not stated, but is equally true, is that you might become jealous of him. So that “right work” does not truly yield anything—unless you find joy and satisfaction in the work itself.

Ecclesiastes 4:5
5 The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.
What that means is shown very plainly in Proverbs.

> Proverbs 6:9–11
> 9 How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?
> 10 Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:
> 11 So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.

“Folded hands” means doing nothing—“a little folding of the hands to sleep.” That brings poverty. In Ecclesiastes, “The fool foldeth his hands together” likewise means he does nothing; and so he “eateth his own flesh”—he wastes away, he consumes himself; he becomes poor and diminished.
This verse stands opposite verse 4. There, a man makes something of himself, does it well—and gets enemies for it. The opposite is: if you do nothing, you are your own enemy. You impoverish yourself and you have no life at all. There is a middle course to be found. Even apart from Scripture, the general principle of wisdom is that a man knows his limits, avoids what he can avoid, and does not drive himself into the ground. The “golden mean” is not called golden for nothing.

Ecclesiastes 4:6
6 Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.
A man should know his limits, because that is usually best. Man has rhythms—times when he is active and must do things, and times when he does not really have to push. In active seasons one should indeed be active; and when there are seasons where one cannot face it, one should consciously take things more quietly.
So on the one side there is an handful with quietness, and on the other an handful with labour. That is how it should be—because “both the hands full with travail” (two fists full, so to speak) becomes “vexation of spirit.” Then it is better to have one hand “full” of quietness. You must weigh that for yourself; and since we are not under law, you must judge what you do

and do not do according to your personality and circumstances. How far do we go? Where do we stop?
The general advice in Ecclesiastes is not to fixate on some end-result, but simply to be engaged in the doing. And quietness—rest—is certainly necessary. If you want the Word of God written in your heart, you must cease from labouring at words engraved on tables of stone, so that your heart may be filled with the Word of God.

Ecclesiastes 4:7–8
7 Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.
8 There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.
If a man is alone—connected to no one—then he may have an urge to labour "without end." The point is not only that he keeps labouring, but also that the labour has no real purpose. What is it for? He just goes on; "his eye is not satisfied with riches." The Preacher's counsel is that such a man should say to himself: For whom am I doing this? Why am I making my life so hard? It yields nothing; he has no one to provide for. What is all this for? So a man should, above all, find pleasure in his activity; for if he is alone, it makes no sense to be busy for some imagined goal "after him." Therefore a man should not go through life alone.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10
9 Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.
10 For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.
With a good outcome ("a good reward") life becomes more stable. Standing on two legs is far steadier than balancing on one. So one should not be alone, but preferably be two. Then one can rely on the other, lean on the other when necessary. It makes life more stable. If one is alone, one is vulnerable. "Woe to him that is alone when he falleth"—for he cannot lift himself up; he needs a companion.

Ecclesiastes 4:11–12
11 Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?
12 And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.
These are simple examples—and often it is by simple arguments that one comes to wisdom. The "threefold cord" means not merely one companion, but at least two: three strands twisted together. That does not break easily; and even if one strand snaps, two remain.
This verse is often pulled out of context and applied to all sorts of situations—weddings especially: man and wife make two, and "the Lord must be the third." That is true in itself; but the Preacher's immediate point here is practical: sometimes one companion is not enough; a man

may need more than one to stand by him. And the most sensible thing of all, of course, is that a man should go through life with God.

Ecclesiastes 4:13
13 Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.
A king who can no longer be admonished ends up alone. He no longer listens to people or counsel; he makes his own decisions on the basis of his power. He is therefore called “old and foolish.” Age may bring experience, but it can also produce the proud delusion that one knows everything; then people do the strangest things and will not be corrected. A “poor and a wise child” has little power, because he is poor; but if he is wise, he can be admonished—he is teachable.

Ecclesiastes 4:14
14 For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.
Two things are set over against each other. Someone born into a kingdom—handed everything on a plate—can only lose it. Someone who has nothing still has something to build, something to hope for. Better to come from below; then life still has something to offer. If you start at the top, it can only go wrong.

Ecclesiastes 4:15
15 I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead.
The idea is that the old king can only decline; the young man will likely outlive him. The verse is phrased awkwardly, but the sense is that the young man—the second, who “shall stand up in his stead”—becomes popular and is not alone; he gathers the people to himself. All the living go along with him. The poor, wise youth rises; the old king loses his hold on the people.

Ecclesiastes 4:16
16 There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit.
The Preacher says the cycle simply continues. The generation that grows up with that young man—who then becomes king and reaches the top—also passes away. And that young man, if he becomes king, will someday be an “old and foolish king” himself and will lose his kingdom. Another generation comes. “History repeats itself”—as chapter 1 already taught. Popularity too passes away. At most it lasts a generation. It passes; and in itself it means nothing.
One should make the best of it, use it if it can be used, enjoy it insofar as one may—but be conscious that it all passes.

Ecclesiastes 4:17
17 Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready

to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil.

The climax of the section is in this verse. It refers to the house of God—the temple, first built by this Preacher, Solomon—and he therefore speaks of it directly: know what you are doing when you go in.

What is the point of going in? Here we arrive at the highest Companion of man. The Preacher's counsel is immediate: "be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil."

"Be more ready to hear"—to draw near in order to listen—is one of Scripture's great themes about approaching the Lord. Hebrews uses the same idea of drawing near to God, now with boldness:

> Hebrews 4:16
> 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

And again:

> Hebrews 7:19
> 19 For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.

That "draw nigh" is the very point: the outward religious activity of man—his sacrifices and performances—was meant to picture approach to God. But not in one's own strength. The Preacher's warning, "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God," is: watch what you are doing; do not go in thinking you are bringing God something to secure His favour. Rather, if you go to Him at all, go to receive from Him—namely His Word. If we listen to Him, it will result in our whole life becoming His possession. We do indeed "offer" ourselves to Him, but the right order is not: first my gift to God, then God's response; it is: first God speaks, we hear, we believe, we submit—and then our life becomes His in practice.

And that sets up the question you end on: you do not imagine that, as a sinner, you can simply come to God and say, "God, here I am, and here is my life—do with it what you will"…

This is a saying from Brother Klaas Rozendaal from Friesland. The story goes that someone once said to him, "Today I gave my life to the Lord Jesus." And he replied, "Well, He'll be pleased with that, won't He." Yes—if you take it literally… what is He supposed to do with that misery?

What Brother Rozendaal meant was that the life being "offered" must first be living, holy, and without blame. If it is—as the result of the reconciling work of the Lord Jesus on the ground of faith—then indeed one may "present" one's body "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God." (Romans 12:1) But first one ought to receive "the word of the Lord"; and that is what the Preacher is saying: first and foremost, one ought to listen to the Lord.

"The sacrifice of fools" means: a sacrifice as fools bring it. "Fools" are not simply stupid people, but those who are not wise—specifically because they do not "fear" the Lord, that is, they do not believe Him. If one does not fear the Lord—does not submit to Him, and so does not serve Him by listening to Him—then one is a fool. A fool is someone who will not listen, and for that reason he remains a fool. And if such a fool has never listened throughout a long life, then it becomes: the older, the more foolish.

There are plenty of such fools about in our day. They are religious and offer God all sorts of things, but listening to Him is not part of it. How do we serve the Lord? Simply by listening to Him. A wise man listens to the Word of God; a man without wisdom only brings his sacrifices. And that is pointless.

I wrote a reference beside it in my Bible to:

> 1 Samuel 15:22
> 22 And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

Obeying the voice of the LORD—giving heed—is better than sacrifice. Listening and hearing is better than “the fat of rams.” The Preacher says in verse 17: if you go into that house of God, it should be to hear and to be instructed by Him. That is better than giving sacrifice. If one draws near to God, it should be to hear His Word—to be taught by Him—because His thoughts are higher, better, and more valuable than ours.

The apostle Paul speaks rather laconically about sacrifices. And though he was not speaking to Jews but to Gentiles, he said: God needs nothing; God is not served by men’s hands. (Acts 17:25) I find that a splendid statement of Paul’s, because it effectively brings all religion to an end.

> Acts 17:22–25
> 22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.
> 23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.
> 24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;
> 25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

God needs nothing from man. God gives to man, not the other way round. He gives us all things, so that we should seek Him—that is what pleases Him.

> Acts 17:27
> 27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

One ought to seek the Lord. He is near; He may be found. Paul is evangelising and saying that the purpose is that men come to faith—acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ—and in general to faith in this God who made heaven and earth. (Colossians 1:16)

We are supposed to understand that the sacrificial animal has a symbolic function. To offer one’s own animal is a picture of offering oneself—giving oneself. In the New Testament the familiar verse in Romans 12 says:

> Romans 12:1
> 1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

One should offer oneself, just as the Lord Jesus Christ did—on the basis of obedience to Him. One should listen to Him.
A great deal of “religion” is formed by prayer, in which man speaks to God, offers Him something, or asks Him for something. But the primary issue is not whether God will hear us; the question is whether we will hear God. God speaks to us. And if we draw near to Him, it should be to let Him instruct us.
I have nothing against prayer, and nothing against prayer meetings either—provided one still remembers what those used to be. But I do object when people talk at the Lord continually and never listen to Him. It must be the other way round. That the Lord also sees and hears us—and listens to us—even when we are not “officially” in prayer, I am quite convinced, especially if we are His children and are accustomed to listening to Him. That is what the Preacher is saying: we should listen to Him, to the Word of God—and that is the heart of all true religion.

Ecclesiastes 5
The thought from chapter 4—that a man should have “a companion,” preferably the Lord, so as to listen to Him—is the introduction to the next pericope, chapter 5. Above it is written “Practical wisdom,” though the whole book is about that.
This section teaches that man lives on earth, but earth is not the only part of the creation. There is also such a thing as heaven. The earth is lower than heaven, and the thrust of the chapter is that man should realise that. He is not the one who decides; he is dependent on what is in heaven, and in any case he is subject to it. What is earthly passes away; what is heavenly directs our attention to the “heaven of heavens”—and beyond the creation itself: God Himself. He is incorruptible.
One of man’s great problems is pride: too much imagination, too great an opinion of himself. Wisdom begins by learning our limitations.

Ecclesiastes 5:1
1 Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.
The Preacher is speaking about saying things in which God is involved—about Him, or perhaps to Him. One should not be “rash” with that. God is in heaven, higher than the earth; His thoughts are higher than ours. Our field of vision and perception is severely limited. We do not see everything, hear everything, touch everything; we do not know everything. So we should not make hasty pronouncements about things we do not understand.
Even if we knew everything about what goes on on earth, we still would not know what is going on in heaven.
A good example is the book of Job. I am rather blunt about it: up to now I have always refused to “discuss” Job, and I have my reasons. It is forty-two chapters, of which I only understand the first and the last. About the chapters in between there is not much more to say. They show the misunderstanding of all those people who busy themselves with the

problem. Their trouble is that they do not know what goes on in heaven, and therefore they cannot give an answer to earthly circumstances—while their “answer” takes up so much space. Have you ever read those endless chapters? You are not supposed to say it in public, but I find it dead boring. There is no fault to pick in their reasonings, and yet the one who reasons does not have all the facts.

On earth we do not have full information. In general terms, everything that happens on earth is the outward expression of what is going on in the “heaven of heavens.” All that is earthly, all that is visible, is the expression of invisible things. But we see only the visible things—the effects—not the causes. The causes lie in an unseen world. If we do not know the causes, what right have we to judge the outward appearances? We must learn to cope with the outside as it is; it is simply so, and we cannot change it. We have to learn to live with it. For that we need wisdom.

One thing we learn is that we ourselves are part of earthly things, and it does not suit us to have a big mouth, because we do not know how it all really is. For example, people so often criticise God because the world is “wrong.” They observe what has always been so, and they blame God. They ask, “Why does God do nothing?” My immediate counter-question is: How do you know God does nothing? Followed by: What do you think God ought to do, then? Can you advise Him? Do you know better than He does?

But people do not know what God is doing. And there is a good reason: first of all, what God does He communicates in His Word. Where a man does not believe that, the matter ends. There is no point going on. That is what the Preacher is saying: you had better keep your mouth shut, because you are earthly.

> Isaiah 55:7–8
> 7 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.
> 8 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

So the Preacher says: “Be not rash with thy mouth… therefore let thy words be few.” In the New Testament James writes to the born-again man —believers—and says much the same.

> James 1:19
> 19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:

That corresponds to Ecclesiastes 4:17 (“be more ready to hear”) and 5:1. What we should do is hear. That applies to natural man—and it applies just as much to us as children of God. We are newly born babes in Christ and ought to be nourished by “the sincere milk of the word.” (1 Peter 2:2) I suspect James is drawing on Ecclesiastes 5.

So we should be careful about what we say to the Lord. The Preacher then expands it:

Ecclesiastes 5:2
2 For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words.
Much activity produces dreams—and dreams come to nothing. The proverb says dreams are deception. The voice of a fool is recognised by the multitude of words. A fool is someone who has nothing to say, but takes a long time saying it. Someone who just pours out words. With thick books you have a good chance it is all about nothing. The lie needs many words, an old saying goes; truth does not.
My father taught me why some people struggle so much to put things into words: because they do not know what they are trying to say. Things you know—things you have insight into—you should be able to say in a few words. The gospel you should be able to tell in a few sentences. If you cannot, you do not know the gospel.

Ecclesiastes 5:3–4
3 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.
4 Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.
Those are not my words, but the Preacher’s. In other words: someone who promises and does not fulfil it is taken for a fool—certainly when the promise was made to God. Better to promise the Lord nothing. What more would you promise Him than simply to be available to serve Him? Specific vows about specific things are best not made. You can intend to do something; a vow binds you. And Scripture makes clear—here and elsewhere—that God holds you to it. A vow is not “non-binding.”
Besides, we do not know God’s plans. We may vow something, but perhaps He had quite other intentions for our life. Verse 5 explains further:

Ecclesiastes 5:5
5 Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?
To “sin” here is precisely the failure to pay the vow from verse 4—the failure to do what you promised. God does not require from us that we do certain self-chosen things. We may vow them, but why should we, if He did not ask it? Often promising is simply pride: “I will do this; I will do that.” James speaks of that too:

> James 4:13–17
> 13 Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:
> 14 Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.
> 15 For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.
> 16 But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.

> 17 Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

We can make plans; but to say, “I will do this and that,” is pride. You set yourself up for trouble—especially if you vow things to the Lord. We expect God to be reliable and faithful. We speak to God, and He should not take us seriously? It does not work like that. God speaks to us because He is able to do what He promises—and He does it, and does not go back on it. If we say to the Lord, “I will do such and such,” you can count on this: He will hold you to it, with all the consequences.

Such “vowing” falls under “a fool's voice… by multitude of words.” Be careful what you say—especially to the Lord. You do not know the circumstances; you do not know what tomorrow brings. It must always be with reservation: “If the Lord will.” (James 4:15)

If we want to do something for the Lord, it really ought not to go further than: “Lord, here am I; what wilt thou have me to do?” That already goes far enough—because He will hold you to it. Yet it is not a vow in the narrow sense; it gives God room to do what He intends to do, and that is far-reaching enough in our lives.

And if we do not keep what we vowed, He “should… be angry at thy voice.” The issue is not simply that you did not do something; the issue is that you said you would, and then you did not. So the problem is not first in the doing or the leaving undone; it is in the big mouth.

In ordinary life I would rather deal with people who promise nothing than with people who promise and do not perform. If they promise me something, I rely on it. If they do not follow through, I have the problem. Better they keep their mouth shut and promise nothing. Then we know where we stand—and it can only turn out better than expected. I say sooner: I will see what I can do—but I promise nothing. I will do my best.

Ecclesiastes 5:6

“For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.”

The more dreams, the more emptiness. All those dreams amount to nothing in practice. The same is true of many words about a simple matter (“vanities”). The finest words are those few words in which so much is said—words with real force, real weight. The final conclusion of this little section is: “but fear thou God”—that is what one ought to do. “Fearing God” simply means taking Him seriously, reckoning with Him in earnest. You do not need to be afraid of Him.

The same comparison—between heavenly and earthly things—is continued in the next section, from verse 7 onwards. It is still about exactly the same point. Man’s word is not important; man is only earthly. The circumstances on earth—about which we may have opinions, or criticisms, or even with which we would presume to challenge God—are only earthly circumstances. Heaven always stands above them. That is what the following verses are about.

From the phrase “before the angel” it is clear that Ecclesiastes truly means God. Saying “before the angel” is the same as “before God” in

verse 1. When one speaks to God as to a Person, in practice one speaks to Jehovah—the revelation of the Divine Being—whom we know as the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament He was known as “the LORD” or as “the Angel, namely the LORD.” We rightly translate this as “the Angel of the LORD.” That “of” does not necessarily mean “belonging to”; it is not an angel from the Lord, but the Angel—namely, the Lord—and therefore the Angel. If Someone appeared to whom one spoke, He—God Himself—was called “the Angel of the LORD,” or simply “the LORD.”

Ecclesiastes 5:8

“If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they.”

“Marvel not at the matter” means: it is simply there—you run into it; you did not cause it; it already exists. That is the sense of it.

What is stated here—plainly, and I know we have to get used to it—is that the oppression of the poor, and injustice in a given land, is not ours to set right. We cannot truly solve those problems; at most we can deal with symptoms. For the power from which they spring (the world lies in the power of Satan) is higher than man and higher than the earth.

According to Old Testament law, we should care for our brothers—our neighbours—who are in need, who fall short, who require help. But that is not the same as trying to deal with the very existence of injustice and oppression in the world. Those are two different things, and the latter is not our business. Our responsibility is to care for ourselves, and from there, for one another.

The one thing we need is grace—and that is precisely what we have received in abundance through Christ Jesus (cf. 1 Timothy 1:14). We need His grace so that we may receive what we need for life as such, without any merit on our part. That is not only what Ecclesiastes teaches us; it is also taught extensively in the New Testament.

In the end, it is true that “he that is higher than the highest regardeth.” The Lord Jesus Christ—unto whom all power is given in heaven and in earth (cf. Matthew 28:18)—who is highly exalted (cf. Philippians 2:9), and who holds a position above the evil one, and thus above “the god of this world” (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) and “the prince of this world” (cf. John 16:11). This verse teaches that there is Someone above all those “high ones,” even above “the highest,” who in practice rules the world. That means that the “Most High”—the shortened form of “he that is higher than the highest”—does indeed take note of “the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice.” He does not intervene immediately; but it does mean that He will intervene, and that those who are guilty of such things will one day be judged for them. For “all things have their appointed time,” as chapter 3 explained.

We know from the prophetic word that in the days of Christ’s return, judgement will indeed come upon “the highest” and upon the “high ones,” and upon “principalities and powers… dominions… [and] thrones” (cf. Colossians 1:16), and that it will finally and definitively take place on the last day—in His time. Some will say that then it is too late; but that is

because they do not look beyond the end of their own nose. This world—this life here—is of a very temporary nature. At the commencement of eternity, that judgement will have taken place.

In our present dispensation, God has deliberately and officially—black on white—let go of the present world, of humanity. Those well-known words occur in the first chapter of the first epistle of the New Testament, and it is stated three times:

> “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:”
>
> “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:”
>
> “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient;”

“Gave them up” means “let them go,” and more than that: it means man tore himself loose, and God simply loosened His grip—“If they insist on going that way, then I let them go.”

Therefore, where the Lord in Old Testament times would, at times, involve Himself in the course of affairs in the world, in our day God’s intervention has been reduced to an absolute minimum—for the general rule is: God has let the world go. That is what the Bible says.

And to the one who says, “But surely we ought to preach the Gospel to the world—that is God’s will,” I say: we should preach the Gospel in the world. Not to improve the world, not to fight injustice, not to fight oppression, but so that people may come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ:

> “Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father:”

God—the Lord Jesus Christ—does not set about “fixing” the world; He draws us out of the world, which is not ours, in which we as children of God do not fundamentally belong. In other words: there is injustice, there is oppression in the world, but we should not devote ourselves to fighting it as though the world could thereby be put right. God will deal with it in His time. Ultimately, “He shall bring forth judgment.” (cf. Isaiah 42:3)

Ecclesiastes 5:9–17

“Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field.” “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.” “When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?”

“The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.” “There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.” “But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and there is nothing in his hand.” “As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.”

“And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?”
“All his days also he eateth in darkness, and he hath much sorrow and wrath with his sickness.”
The simple thought is that we live, in every respect, from the earth. We are “of the earth, earthy” (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:47) and we live from it. If you have only something to eat, live on what the earth brings forth—because more than that you cannot truly manage anyway. These reflections ought to humble us. For however high we may climb in the eyes of others, in practice it means nothing: we are what we have always been—“of the earth, earthy.” The earthly man lives from the earth and will return to the earth (cf. Genesis 3:19). Therefore, modesty suits us, in the knowledge that we are only here temporarily. The same is true of all “high places” on earth—even of the king.
For the one who loves money there is never satisfaction; it is never enough. If you love abundance you will never be filled. It is emptiness: if you want a great deal, it is never sufficient—you always want more and more. Man imagines that he thereby becomes “more,” or “higher,” that he acquires more standing or becomes “somebody.” But it is not so. He remains the same man with all his shortcomings. However much money you have, however great your possessions—whether you are a billionaire or a poor wretch—if something is wrong with you, you die. Whether you are rich or poor, whether you have status or not, it makes no real difference. What we truly need is what the earth itself already yields—and one can be filled with that. It is enough, Ecclesiastes says repeatedly: enough to be content, enough to find joy.
When wealth increases, there are always more mouths to feed from it. You build a business, you need staff, and they must also eat. That may well be useful for employment; it may keep others occupied. All that may be true, but it changes nothing about the principle: it is simply how it goes. And whether all that “increase” is truly good for your nerves and your rest—there is plenty to be said about that, but Ecclesiastes’ verdict is that it is not.
In general, wealth does not help you sleep better. If you want to sleep well, do heavy work; it helps the night’s rest. A man must do something, and at the end of the day he is tired—and, further, satisfied that he has done a good day’s work—so he sleeps well. That is rest. But the one with many possessions does not sleep soundly, because those possessions are vulnerable.
Investing occupies people greatly—often all day, and therefore at night as well. If shares fall, you do not sleep well. If the price rises, you also do not sleep well, because you think: perhaps I should have sold today, because now they are worth more. What is it all about? About nothing—numbers and paper. It keeps the world busy, but it is pitiable business. Apart from that, it is thoroughly unbiblical. Making money without working for it is absolutely unbiblical. I am firmly convinced that all those stock-market practices will be forbidden in the thousand years. Under the law—the Mosaic law—it is in any case forbidden. If you have shares and they go threefold over the top, who pays for that, do you think? Ultimately

someone else who has to work for it. Money does not arise by itself; it must be worked for. I am not an anti-capitalist—certainly not, for I have no alternative either. But that it is an unjust principle, and that it leads to oppression and injustice, I am convinced. Therefore I am not troubled when someone suffers large losses in shares. Then I think: back to the ground.

Man's pride—the old theme that keeps returning in this book—drives him to: I want more, I want higher, and I want still more. More of everything and higher than everything. But in time such a man becomes "old and full of days" (cf. Job 42:17), and then he tumbles down again with a heavy crash.

There is "a sore evil" that brings sickness: wealth stored up by its owners to their own hurt. Often wealth leads to the ruin of the rich. At some point it turns against them—if only because wealth breeds jealousy, or revolution when the poor turn against the rich. Sooner or later it goes wrong. This can be seen in great upheavals—revolutions against wealthy rulers—but it happens on smaller scales too. Wealth can turn on someone. A man labours to become rich, and afterwards it all collapses.

Or wealth perishes through some harmful enterprise: a man has money, undertakes something, gambles too far, and loses everything he had. That too happens, and it drives some even to destruction. A man who is poor, or who has only enough to live on, can scarcely be struck in that way—he does not have the means to take such risks.

And then: "he begetteth a son." Sons have a tendency to run through the father's wealth. There is a reason: they have no idea what it is, because they never had to work hard for it. They receive it for free, so they throw it away just as freely. Not that it always happens, but it happens often enough. Father must leave everything he built up to his own flesh and blood. The whole idea that one must "leave something" to the next generation is sheer fantasy. People may cherish it, but in practice it does not reliably work. You have to wait and see, and you cannot build your life upon it.

The lesson of this book is that one should not harbour such lofty notions: not too high expectations of life, not grasping too high, not setting oneself such high goals, but living by what God gives today. At day's end we ought, in honesty, to ask ourselves: did I have any joy in it? Did I do something I was glad about? Was there something that gave me real satisfaction? Can I give thanks for this? That is the point. God gives it; the question is whether we make use of it. And that is our personal responsibility—not whether we "achieved" something, but whether we found joy and peace in what we were doing; whether we were sincere before the Lord; whether we lived out of what He gave for this day.

Verse 14 concludes: "and there is nothing in his hand." The expression really means: even if he has everything in his hand, he still has nothing—add it all up and it comes to precisely zero.

So, if you think you must still enjoy your wealth, the wisest thing is to begin immediately. You cannot "save up" your days off for next year. If you die, you lose everything. You do not even have to die: you can become weak, ill, or unwell in any number of ways, so that you no longer have the

ability to enjoy what you gathered. One should do it today. We take nothing out of this world.
Therefore, it is “a sore evil” that a man comes into the world empty and goes out the same way; and what profit is it to have laboured “for the wind”? A man can become sick from that truth. You do not need to be a great philosopher to see that, in that case, you “get nowhere,” that what you do does not lead to lasting result. You can make your life hard if you wish—but there can be no permanent outcome here. So one should not set one’s heart upon it. If one does set one’s heart upon it, it “bringeth sickness.”
I am convinced that many ailments—carefully said: not all, but in general—are the result of disappointments in this life. It is a known reality that, if you carry many disappointments, your body has a tendency to withdraw—by falling sick, even by dying. That is nature—human nature too. Daily we ought to find our joy and peace in what we are occupied with. That does not mean you will have no afflictions, but it makes them bearable.
Do not take those words too heavily: cheerful, thankful people do not live to 180 either. But if you prize a healthy life, you must in the first place live healthily. That certainly touches food, but it has far more to do with your spiritual food—your spiritual “metabolism”—what you take in, the thoughts you form, the thoughts you adopt or develop, and the thoughts by which you live. That is why it is a comfort that we know we have eternal life; in that we rejoice. Each day we may live out of the grace of God and serve Him. Each day we even have the opportunity to receive a little more glory, because we serve Him today. That is what it is about—this is what this book sets before us. Everything else is secondary. We should indeed experience and accept it as a gift of God.
“And what profit hath he…?” What benefit is it, in the end, that he has laboured “for the wind”—that is, in heavy weather, in poor circumstances, that he has done hard labour?
And verse 17 continues the question: what profit is it if he has eaten “in darkness” all his days—that is, lived under hard circumstances—if he has had much grief, and his sickness too, and violent anger? What profit does such a man have from such a life? None.

Ecclesiastes 5:17
“Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion.” (Ecclesiastes 5:18)
“Eating and drinking” is not only meant literally, though it often begins there. If possible, you ought to be able to enjoy every mouthful you take. It is about being aware of what you are doing—tasting it, taking it in, truly experiencing it. Realising how fortunate and how well provided for you are—and not only while you are eating, of course. The same applies to what you are allowed to do day by day: enjoying “the good of all his labour,” of all his hard work—“which he taketh under the sun,” that is, on earth.
So Ecclesiastes is not such a pessimistic book. Nor is it cynical, as people often suppose. It simply wipes the floor with human ambition—with “the

daily madness." Someone once observed (and that is where the expression comes from) that a major part of what people occupy themselves with, day in and day out, is "madness." Things are inflated; everything that happens is blown up into something great. Things one hears are puffed up as terribly impressive. That is the madness of every day, because a few days later it all means nothing. In truth it was nothing much to begin with, but by nature it is exaggerated, as though it were so big and so interesting. We should see through that madness—realise it is nonsense—and understand that the Lord expects of us (as this verse says) that we should enjoy what we receive from Him day after day.

Some people never get that far because they overlook the small things of everyday life. We should know our modest place, and enjoy what God gives us today—and tomorrow is a new day.

> "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." (Matthew 6:34)

The same principle applies to the good. It is like the manna (Numbers 11): if you have little, it is enough; and if you have too much, it does not keep until the next day, so it does you no good. So live today. What tomorrow brings is discussed elsewhere in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 5:18

"Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God."

God gives a man riches and goods, and God also gives him the power—the ability, even the right (for that is what "power" really means here)—to eat of it, to take his share, and therefore to rejoice in his labour. For many people this is not enough, because they look at it wrongly through pride; nevertheless we should be content with what God gives us. We should learn to value it. In practice it usually proves to be far more than we often think.

Perhaps these are the "small things" of life—but what are "small things," really? Who decides that? And besides, it is to be feared that if we do not learn to value the small things in life, we will not value the big things either. Man's problem is that he imagines himself to be something great, and therefore he must accomplish something great. The Bible speaks completely differently: it says there is only One who is great, and that is God. Man should learn to enjoy what God gives on earth, and also know his place as one subject to God the Creator. Then God will bless him for it.

It is true that this "gift of God" does not help to push man "forward in the progress of the nations." But who says he must be pushed forward like that? It is also true that it does not help to improve the world—but who appointed us to improve the world? Chapter 1 has already established that it cannot be done: it is utterly impossible, because the world truly is lacking in many things. What is not there, we cannot add; what is crooked, we cannot make straight. And that is not our task.

The Bible speaks of a future, and it teaches that this future is determined by God and will be brought about by Him. And we may have a share in it by grace and through faith—free of charge, a gift; we do not have to do anything for it. We simply receive it.

Ecclesiastes 5:19

“For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.” (Ecclesiastes 5:20)

The thought is that we will not look back on the past in bitterness—on everything that has happened to us: all the misery we have endured, and perhaps also all the prosperity we have enjoyed. We simply live today, with our eyes on a future that God has promised us—not in this life or in this old world, but in the New Creation, because that is what God has promised. Everything else passes away. The whole world is full of passers-by, and I have always found that a comforting thought.

That “God answereth him in the joy of his heart” is what it always comes down to. Our well-being is determined by the measure of joy we have. And the question is: where do we find our joy? Is it in improving the world? You and I know it does not work. It can never bring true satisfaction. Thousands of years of human history have surely taught us that nothing can be improved and nothing can be changed in that way; there is nothing for it but to live day by day as we receive each day, and to use it—finding our joy in that.

Six thousand years of human history teaches us exactly the same. God has not improved the world in those six thousand years, and man cannot do it either. Nothing has changed. The Bible teaches that this is not the point at all. It teaches that this world—and therefore human life—has a temporary function, with possible outcome for the future.

The low point in chapter 6 (and perhaps part of chapter 7) makes us think, and that is of course the intention. Ecclesiastes is not the sort of book where you say, “Oh, it says that—so I believe it.” These are thoughts you must chew over, consider again and again, let them pass through your mind, make them your own, and learn to live out of them.

Ecclesiastes 6:1–12

“There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men:”

“A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it: this is vanity, and it is an evil disease.”

“If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.”

“For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness.”

“Moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing: this hath more rest than the other.”

“Yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, yet hath he seen no good: do not all go to one place?”

“All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.”

“For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living?”

“Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit.”
“That which hath been is named already, and it is known that it is man: neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he.”
“Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better?”
“For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?”

The “evil” is “common among men”—that is, it is widespread. Or you could translate it as: “it weighs heavily upon men,” meaning it presses hard upon them.
The point of this chapter is that if man has any purpose in life at all, it should be this: to experience the good. It is called “to see,” in an older sense of the word—for “to see” means to experience, to undergo, to live through. He should “see” the good. A man may have riches, goods, honour, and lack nothing he desires, but if he has no opportunity to benefit from it, then he still has nothing. A grand house full of beautiful paintings—but the man is blind. Or as to eating and drinking: imagine having a weak stomach, or allergies. It is not for nothing that it says: “this is vanity, and it is an evil disease.” Objectively he has everything his heart desires, but if he cannot use it, everything comes to a halt.
Regarding “an hundred children”: the translators thought it literally meant a hundred children. That seems unlikely to me. In my view it means “as though a man had everything he could want”—as in 100%, complete. Then nothing is lacking. It is repeating the previous verse. The word “children” may be set aside; it is not in the Hebrew. “His soul” points to his practical life. His life was not “filled with good.” He received no good; he saw no good; he had no good. However long he lives, it makes no difference—it leads to nothing. It even adds, “and also that he have no burial.” The man apparently does not die—he becomes that old. He just goes on living and living; he has everything, yet his life is not filled with good. Verse 2 already said the same: if “God giveth him not power to eat thereof,” what is the point of growing old? What good is it? If someone has a pleasant life and becomes old, that is one thing. But there are circumstances where we all sometimes think: why does someone grow so old?
The blunt conclusion is: “an untimely birth is better than he.” An “untimely birth” is a miscarriage, a still-born child. Though some tell me that in Hebrew it does not mean a miscarriage but an afterbirth, a placenta—something not viable in itself, and never intended to be. In any case, the Preacher then explains why. If you ask me, there is no arguing with the point: the life of someone who has everything but does not know how to enjoy it—whatever the circumstances—has no meaning. For what is the point of his existence, if (as has been made clear in earlier chapters) the intent is that a man should enjoy the good of his labour, and he does not?

“Departeth in darkness” and “his name shall be covered with darkness” means: it is given over to oblivion; it is not remembered. “He hath not seen the sun” does not only mean he never saw daylight; it also means he never lived in the sun—never had a share in it. And it says he has “more rest” than the other—the man who lives on and on, has everything, yet does not enjoy the good. That is even more pointless, even worse, than the untimely birth, and verse 6 confirms it: what does it matter? Both go to the same place.

Even if a man could accomplish great works—building houses, planting vineyards, making gardens and orchards, pools of water (as chapter 2 describes)—it may be possible, but the Preacher has concluded that the only enjoyment is the doing of it, the building of it, the bringing of it into being. Once it is finished, the enjoyment is gone; then it merely stands there, and you have nothing left to do, because it is all “done.” And the next generation then has nothing to do either, because it is all already there and finished. The only enjoyment is being busy with it—the labour itself. “life's meaning can be found in the pursuit of pleasures, and Ecclesiastes teaches it too.

“All the labour of man is for his mouth” does not mean merely that a man works only to eat. “Eating” stands for the whole of life—for everything that comes to us in life. The point is whether he himself has some joy in it, and whether it shapes him. Yet “the appetite is not filled”: that is the problem. It is never enough. Man always wants more and is never satisfied with what he has. If he follows that appetite, he becomes its slave at once, because it is never truly filled—so it does not lead anywhere.

Therefore a man should learn to be content “with such things as ye have”:

> “Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” (Hebrews 13:5)

And Paul puts it like this:

> “And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.” (1 Timothy 6:8)

First learn to enjoy that, and thank God for it. Then it is quite likely God will give us something more, because we find it so good. Our gratitude makes it, as it were, worthwhile for God to give. Among people it works much the same way.

Whether wise or foolish, poor or rich, highly educated or not, many possessions or few—it does not make so much difference. What matters is the principle that a man learns to live with what he has. “Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire.” The “wandering of the desire” is living by what you want but do not yet have—walking a path driven by future cravings. Because man never has enough, that becomes a wrong way of life; it can never reach a final satisfying outcome, and therefore it is “vanity and vexation of spirit.”

A better alternative is “the sight of the eyes”—attending to what is present, perceiving what is here, and honouring what you already have. Paul calls that “the present.” Fix yourself on what you already possess, and enjoy it, rather than becoming sour because you lack something else. We want this and we want that, and we forget what we already have; we

forget to use it, and we are not satisfied. I know different people experience things differently, and I will not judge anyone in it. But it is a principle each of us must weigh in our own life: do we live mainly to satisfy desires, while passing over the blessings we have already received? Or is it the other way around—do we live first out of what is present? You may have wishes; there is nothing wrong with that in itself. But if wishes begin to govern your life, then it is absolutely wrong.

It is two principles set against each other: do we chase what we do not yet have and desperately want? Or do we focus on the possibilities and possessions—the blessings (as I prefer to call them)—we already have? That latter attitude marks the true "artist of living." It is not about what he lacks; it is about what he has. You can say, "I do not have this and I do not have that; I cannot do this or that," but find out what you do have, and what you can do—or might learn to do. Making an effort for something is precisely what makes it enjoyable, said the Preacher.

Finally, "that which hath been is named already… it is known that it is man." The meaning is: his identity is already fixed; his limitations are set. In the Bible, a "name" is always identity—what someone truly is. Thus, the limits of his abilities, his possibilities, and his lifespan are established. It is known that he is a man—of the earth, earthy; weak and bound to the earth, with limited and declining possibilities. And he cannot contend "with him that is mightier than he." I do not understand why it is not capitalised, because who is mightier than man is clear.

This passage's thrust is: man is very limited, but what he can do—what he certainly ought to do—is to enjoy the good.

And it is precisely here that people are inclined to put man in God's place—to deify man. People even use Bible texts to do it. We used to have to serve God; nowadays you are told you must serve "your neighbour." We have made our neighbours—whoever they may be—into God. God has been pushed out, and man has been put in His place. Sometimes even an animal, for some people's "religion" is nothing but the worship of animals or even plants; and they would have man devote himself to them, in effect subjecting himself to them.

You even hear in so-called Christian circles that God gave the earth to man, and that man (as Adam's descendant) is responsible for the management of the earth. That is not so. Genesis 1 already says that the earth would be subjected to the Lord Jesus Christ—the Man in God's image and likeness. The Bible teaches that man as he is now is subject to the earth, not ruler over it. Man depends on the earth; he comes from it and returns to it. Man does not rule the earth; we are not capable of it—the earth rules him. That, at any rate, is what Ecclesiastes says. Only as New Creation in Christ will it be otherwise.

Why does mankind fare so badly? Because it imagines it must improve the world—and of course nothing comes of it. It is no joy to be occupied with it either. So where would man get his joy, his peace, his rest? It is impossible. We must abandon that whole notion. It is completely unrealistic and unbiblical. God will use us—believers—for important things, but those have nothing to do with improving the world and all that is in it. What matters is that we know our humble place, knowing that

where truly important things must happen to the world, God must do them. And if we believe God will do it, then why are we trying to do it ourselves? That suggests we do not truly believe it in practice.

Ecclesiastes 6:11
“Seeing there be many things that increase vanity, what is man the better?” (Ecclesiastes 6:11)
There are many things that increase emptiness. In the Bible, it is leaven that increases emptiness: it makes things rise. It does not make them more in substance, not heavier; it only makes them bigger. Because the mass does not increase while it becomes larger, it follows that it becomes ever more hollow, ever more empty.
Scientists say that space—which by definition is already empty—expands. They require an expanding universe, so that it becomes emptier and emptier and emptier. With increasing speed, they even claim. The way they look at the world confirms precisely what I have been setting out from Ecclesiastes.
When they look at the world, what do they see? It becomes bigger and bigger, and therefore emptier. In principle they are right—only not literally. They are wrong because they look from the wrong side, or else use the wrong measuring rod. The world of the scientist who studies phenomena becomes emptier and emptier. Little by little they have learned so much that in the end they know nothing about anything.
Sometimes this is called “puffed-up-ness.” But puffed-up-ness is simply emptiness. It looks like something, but in reality it is nothing.
Leaven is an image of false doctrine, with all the consequences that follow. False doctrine from the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians—three sects that fought each other tooth and nail. One says (the Herodians): you must achieve your ideals by political means. The Pharisees say: you must keep yourself strictly to all prescriptions and rules. The Sadducees say: we must sort it all out ourselves as human beings. Those are the rationalists, the liberals. It is all nonsense.

Ecclesiastes 6:12
“For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 6:12)
We are not meant to “achieve” something, but to live out of the hand of God. He will achieve what must be achieved; and He does know what the future brings, and therefore we receive from Him each day. We submit ourselves to Him daily. We serve Him each day, and above all we give thanks for everything we receive that day. That is how we learn to be conscious of what we have received—because you must know what you are thanking Him for.
What remains is the life of today, and that is indeed meaningful. That is what gives our existence content and purpose. Moreover, it gives us hope—(and in the Bible, “hope” means certainty)—concerning the promises God has made to us.

Ecclesiastes 7

Insofar as we live in this present world (this present aeon)—and we do, in a certain sense—it should be moderate. We should deny “ungodliness and worldly lusts.” “Ungodliness” and “worldly lusts” are synonyms: worldly lusts are nothing other than ungodliness. Either one lives to the honour of God as servants of God, or else one follows the lusts of the world. If one follows them, one is not serving God, but of course the world.

We should realise that, insofar as we are still—at least bodily—in this present world, we must not be driven or led by those worldly lusts, because in practice that is ungodliness. We should live restrained—that is, soberly—and therefore also righteously and godly in this present world.

The Bible teaches us not to place our expectation upon the world as such—certainly not upon improving the world, let alone working toward that—because Scripture teaches it is an absolute impossibility.

“Moderately,” “righteously,” and “godly” are three terms in a row, but “moderately” stands first because it is the defining mark. We are meant to hold ourselves back, not to join in with everything—certainly not with all the striving of natural man or the world, where it is always about a better world and building a future.

This book of Ecclesiastes—indeed, the whole Bible—sweeps that away completely. Another world is coming; it is better, but not an improved version of the present world. Just as we, as children of God, are not a modification of what we are by nature—no mere adjustment, no improvement of details—but rather, the old passes away and everything becomes new:

> “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Paul writes what we, living in this world, should be looking for:

> “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;”
>
> “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” (Titus 2:13–14)

That is the biblical truth by which we live in a world that is passing away. God has let that world go. The point is that man should enjoy the good within that world, while not placing his confidence in it, but in the Lord.

Ecclesiastes 7:1–5

“A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth.”

“It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.”

“Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.”

“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.”

“It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.” (Ecclesiastes 7:1–5)

For those who consider Ecclesiastes a cynical book, these passages will not be surprising. They are simply statements of fact. Again we have a fivefold comparison: five times it says, “this is better than that,” while we are inclined always to choose “that” rather than “this.” For example, “to go to the house of mourning” in verse 2—we would rather go to “the house of feasting” than enter a house of mourning. Or verse 3: we would rather laugh than sorrow.

“A good name is better than precious ointment,” and then again, “the day of death than the day of one's birth.” That second statement explains the first. It is about having a good in memoriam—a reputation, not while someone is still living, but evidently after he has died. That may not be obvious from the first clause alone, but the second clause in the same verse makes it clear enough.

You could read it like this: it is better to have a good remembrance than precious ointment—for “ointment” is an expression for gladness, for celebration. It is, in practice, a wordplay: in Hebrew “name” and “oil” are very similar words, with different uses. Both carry the idea of something that shines, something with a sheen, something glossy. Oil makes things gleam—hence we rub furniture with oil. Oil is also expected to spread light, and so it “shines.” “Name,” even in English (though we do not always feel it as strongly today), means reputation: a kind of “glow” about someone. A name can evoke much, because much is attached to a name—good or bad reputation. So there is a connection between “name” and “ointment.”

The thought is this: one can be better off dead, better off confronted with death, because more “light” comes from that than from a party.

So here is the assertion: “the day of death” is better than the day of birth. That does not feel true to us, but the Preacher explains how he arrives at it.

In verse 2 he says: “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting.” In the house of mourning the in memoriam (verse 1) is spoken; the house of feasting may be the celebration of a birth.

Then comes the explanation: “for that is the end of all men.” In the house of mourning you meet the end of all men. And there is a double sense here: “end” can also mean “goal.” If one is heading somewhere, toward some end, then—according to the Preacher—that end is found at the house of mourning. That is the end for all men.

And “the living will lay it to his heart”—I would render that as: the living takes it to heart. The living man still has all sorts of plans; he wants all sorts of things. For the dead, all those plans have come to a stop. That is the end of them. The thought is simple: when one is confronted with death—when one enters the house of mourning—one is truly confronted with reality. The Preacher says one learns more in the house of mourning than at a feast.

Not that there is anything wrong with a feast. One should enjoy the good; that has been said often enough. But whether one learns anything from a

feast as such—probably not. If a man is to learn anything, he will do better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. For when one is faced with the fact that a human life is very perishable—and therefore very relative—when one is faced with human suffering in general, one is usually open to learn. The first thing a man should learn, if he wishes to become wise, is to be conscious of the perishableness of life. "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning… the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." That is often mere superficiality—only the surface. Perhaps there is nothing "wrong" with it, but you do not learn from it; it is not to be taken seriously. If one is wise, one is conscious of the house of mourning. In the house of mourning one becomes wise.

Joyful Christians, who also show it, are conscious of the perishableness of life here. They have set their expectation upon "the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour." (Titus 2:13). Despite everything that may befall believers, one can still be glad. That future expectation is not self-invented; it rests upon the promises of God.

> "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us." (2 Corinthians 1:20)

We live by that. We know the best is yet to come; that is still owed to us. If you learn that life is temporary and learn to see its relativity—if you learn, in that sense, to laugh—then not so much can shake you anymore. Medically speaking, laughter is healthy. You learn it in the house of mourning—that is the point. Much humour is born precisely out of grief and sorrow; it is a way to survive. That is what one learns there.

Verse 5 follows on: "It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than… the song of fools." We would rather hear "the song of fools"—it can be amusing enough—but you do not learn anything from it. Yet we still prefer that sort of harmless nonsense to being rebuked and corrected by a wise man. But, says the Preacher, you are better off hearing the rebuke of the wise. It may not be pleasant, but if he is wise you may learn something—and you will profit from it for the rest of your life.

First we must be confronted with reality. My view is: once we have accepted reality, we can also cope with foolishness. If we do not know reality—or refuse to see it—then we cannot tolerate irony or mockery either.

Ecclesiastes 7:6

"For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 7:6)

For "sound," supply "crackling," because that is really the idea. Thorn-branches are burned under a pot; a fire is made under a pot. The imagery concerns heating—perhaps even for brewing.

What is being said is roughly this: thorns throughout the Bible are an image of the law—"the elements of the world"—and therefore also of "the care of this world."

> "And the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." (Matthew 13:22)

"Care" here is the trouble of this life. The thought is that these thorns are burned and become, as it were, the cause of the strong drink produced in

the pot. The drink pictures the feast, the gladness. Man escapes from the world as such and ends up in folly—and often in stupidity as well. “This also is vanity.” It leads to nothing.
It is expressed somewhat cryptically. There is even a wordplay: the Hebrew word behind “pot” and the word behind “thorns” are closely related—just as in verse 1 “name” and “ointment” are close. These things sit near one another and therefore have an association.
So even something like carnival can be viewed as an escape from “the cares of this life”—a few days away—but it leads nowhere. One should learn something out of suffering, and out of the house of mourning: namely, to live with the perishableness and limitation of earthly existence, and therefore to be conscious of these things. Then one becomes wise, and one can also come to joy, and to enjoying the good. One will value the good because one also knows the bad.

Ecclesiastes 7:7
“Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad; and a gift destroyeth the heart.” (Ecclesiastes 7:7)
Here too I am inclined to adjust the sense of the translation slightly (with all respect to the translators, for translation remains difficult). What is rendered “oppression” is often, more generally, injustice—fraud, exploitation. That is oppression, because it wrongs someone else.
But then the verse goes on to speak of “a gift.” So what is it about—oppression or a gift? The answer is: both at once; and in our language we would call it bribery. Bribery can make a wise man mad, and it corrupts the heart. That means the mind is corrupted as well (since in this context it amounts to the same thing), and thus one becomes foolish. It is about taking bribes. That leads to lust, and that is the general principle behind the law.
James later explains it:

> “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:”
> “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.”
> “Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.” (James 1:13–15)

No one is tempted by God; and insofar as we are tempted, it is by our own desire—otherwise we would not be receptive to it. Our desire may well be stronger than our understanding. Some people are therefore unwise: they allow themselves to be bribed, they join in the injustice so that they benefit. For that they set wisdom aside—and that is not wise, says this verse.
One should become wise; one should not be led away from wisdom. One should not participate in this manner of the world. Politics, business, the whole economy, in practice runs on that injustice—“oppression”—fraud and bribery. All of that “maketh a wise man mad.”
Wisdom is not learned that way. It is learned rather when one is confronted with the house of mourning—confronted with man’s perishableness. Then human pride is immediately brought to an end.

Ecclesiastes 7:18
“It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all.”
One ought to know and use the concepts of “righteousness” and “wickedness” in life. Yet, in general, one should fear God. That is far more important than trying to go through life rigidly, without compromise. One should serve the Lord.
For us under the New Covenant this is easy to grasp. We are instructed by the grace of God. We know biblical—and therefore righteous—principles. But we do not live out of those principles as though they were our life; rather, we live out of the grace of God. Personally we have received forgiveness for our offences, and we still receive that forgiveness for our shortcomings and, if need be, for the compromises we make.
Therefore, first and foremost, we should set our hearts on our service to the Lord. From these principles we should also, as believers living under the New Covenant, live together with one another: not holding it against one another when things go wrong, but forgiving one another.
In other words: categories like “righteous” and “wicked” are not the first thing in our life. They come later. The first concern is that the attributes of God’s own being are realised in us—grace, mercy, lovingkindness, and suchlike. The Lord Himself fulfilled the law, so that we may live in this way. That is the background to such sayings as “Be not righteous over much,” and “Be not over much wicked.”

Ecclesiastes 7:19
“Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city.” (Ecclesiastes 7:19)
It is wisdom not to be “over much righteous” and not “over much wicked.” Wisdom gives a man strength—more, even, than “ten mighty men” who govern the city.
“In the city” has the sense of “in a kingdom,” or “in society.” The “ten mighty men” point to the law: they say, “This is permitted, that is forbidden; do this, do not do that.” But what a man needs even more is wisdom.
If so many laws are required, then evidently people lack wisdom. Where there is no law, a man must ask for wisdom. Yet people ask for law: those are the ones who are “over much righteous.” They ask, “What does the law prescribe?” In doing that they shift their own responsibility away from themselves—and ruin themselves. Others ask for wisdom, and that is far more sensible.
The problems in our lives have an important effect: they teach us wisdom and teach us to carry responsibility. That benefits us far more than all those rules.
Someone will say: “But isn’t the law instruction? Doesn’t it make a person wise?” It could—but in practice it seldom does. That is the problem with law. People treat it as a checklist of prescriptions and rules, each to be kept one by one. The Lord Jesus, in His earthly ministry, taught us

otherwise. He said, for example, that one commandment is “greater” than another:

> “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.
> This is the first and great commandment.” (Matthew 22:37–38)

And sometimes one commandment “breaks” another in the sense that a higher claim governs what happens:

> “Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?” (Matthew 12:5)

So the question always becomes: how do you apply it? And that means: in practice you still need wisdom. It may be that someone develops wisdom from the instruction he receives, but wisdom always has to do with practical life as such. Law always falls short there.

Ecclesiastes 7:20

“For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.”
This statement is more or less echoed in Romans:

> “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:
> There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.
> They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” (Romans 3:10–12)

If no man is righteous, why should we strive to be so—as though we could achieve it? What sense does that make in practice? If we try to be righteous on earth and not to sin, then we are only engaging in pride. We should realise that man inevitably falls short, and that does not change with all his good intentions. Indeed, the more he strives to be perfect, the more he will destroy himself. He will make himself impossible within society. It is pointless.
One should have standards, but at the same time be aware that one cannot meet them fully. That does not mean the Preacher teaches that we may simply do as we like because “it doesn’t matter anyway.” One should indeed “take hold of this” (verse 18). One should “withdraw not thine hand” from these things. One should know the standards—knowing that the practice of life is such that one cannot always keep them. If one insists on it regardless, one is being very foolish.
Nor does it bring reward in itself. Reward belongs to giving honour to the Lord in one’s life—seeking to serve Him. That is something different from attempting to keep a law, of which Scripture says it has the effect of bringing sin to light and, in that sense, making it active.
There will always be people who misunderstand and misuse such statements; we can do nothing about that. But these sayings show great practical wisdom: they teach you the relativity of things—even of things the Lord holds as absolute in principle: “this is how it should be.” And then it turns out that in practice it cannot be done, or is not attainable, or is unwise even before the Lord to insist on it.

You will run into that sooner or later. Things simply go differently. If not in your own life, then in the life of others. You may be tempted to judge them; but perhaps they are being wise. Then you can learn something. We must lead our own life, make our own choices, while recognising that we are not perfect—and that the Lord does not expect that from us. What He expects is that, under all circumstances, we place service to Him at the top of our life, and that we use the opportunities we do have. Those opportunities are not very great, because we are not very great. That has been the theme for a whole chapter: we human beings are not much.

Ecclesiastes 7:21
“Also take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee:” (Ecclesiastes 7:21)
The thought is that we hear too much—especially too much of what others say about us. The Preacher says: do not listen to it. You may hear it with your ears, but he says, “take no heed… unto all words.” We should not take “all words” so seriously.
For example, think of “the madness of the day”: at the moment something happens it seems far bigger than it really is. We inflate it at once. A few days later there is often little or nothing left of it. What seemed crucial at one moment later proves not to have been so crucial at all. We get an idea and we air it, but one or two days later we have learned to put it in perspective. Then it turns out to be different from what we thought and said.
If you do “hear all words that are spoken,” you would in effect have to shrug them off: let them talk. They may even be right. But if I had to give my heart to everything said about me, I would have no life left.
“Lest thou hear thy servant curse thee”: every employer knows that staff sometimes curse the boss—at least at times. They do well not to listen. Otherwise they would have no staff left. And conversely, if our boss says something nasty about us, it may be wise to listen briefly—he might be right. But above all, we serve our heavenly Lord:
“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;” (Colossians 3:23)
That is how we should go through life.

Ecclesiastes 7:22
“For oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.” (Ecclesiastes 7:22)
Our heart—and perhaps our mouth as well, though that is not even stated—has many times cursed others too. So let us grant one another the right to vent, now and then. In the heat of the day it comes across harshly, but a few days later it often makes no difference. It is unpleasant, and it is not “perfect,” but that is how man is—and therefore how a Christian can be too.

Ecclesiastes 7:23
“All this have I proved by wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me.” (Ecclesiastes 7:23)

“Proved” here is “searched out,” “investigated.” Everything we have read has to do with wisdom in general and with right in particular. The Preacher wanted to “be wise”—that was his aim. Yet wisdom was “far from me,” he says.

In our younger years we are not wise. We have not lived much of life. We learn it later, and only then are we wise and able to carry responsibility for our own life. Try simply to get through life: it takes wisdom.

And then the Preacher says, from verse 24 onward—this is the final section, and in a sense the conclusion of the chapter—you may seek wisdom, but how do you find it? Or put another way: how many there are who truly find it?

Ecclesiastes 7:24

“That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out?” (Ecclesiastes 7:24)

“That which is far off” points back to “it was far from me.” It is “exceeding deep.” And how many are there who will find it out? How many become wise?

Young people generally do not—and you cannot expect it. Old people create a different problem: by definition, they become fewer. By the time a man has become wise, his time has come—not “God’s time,” but his own. Then he is wise, but has not much time left to make use of it. What remains is less important than the years that went before. That is the tragedy of this world: death always comes too soon. It is the curse that lies over the world, which lies in the power of him that has the power of death:

> “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;” (Hebrews 2:14)

That is his chief weapon. So man never becomes wise; by the time he might, he must depart. Or he is “sidelined” earlier—often that happens in practice. It is tragic that people with life experience, people who have gained wisdom, are pushed out to the margins in various ways.

Ecclesiastes 7:25

“I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness:” (Ecclesiastes 7:25)

“I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out”—it is said three times, with emphasis. “The reason of things” is his search for the essence of wisdom, the essence of existence, the thing that can be summed up in one sentence: the conclusion.

He found many details—but what is the point, the punchline, the final conclusion? As for the negative side—“the wickedness of folly… foolishness and madness”—he certainly saw that clearly.

He says in verse 23: I did not find wisdom; it was “far from me.” It was very hard. And then he says: I found something worse still.

Ecclesiastes 7:26

“And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her.” (Ecclesiastes 7:26)

Death is indeed “a bitter thing,” because it prevents man from attaining wisdom and living out the effect of it. Man would need wisdom before he even begins life—that would help him greatly. The world would look very different. That is why death is “a bitter thing.”

In Scripture, bitterness is also bound up with death: what is bitter is, in that sense, poisonous—corrupt, spoiled, leading to decay. So the Preacher says: “I find more bitter than death…” But what could be more bitter—worse—than death?

Only this: that a man has already lost his life before he dies. That he goes through life as a bound man—vegetating. And insofar as he “lives,” he lives another person’s life. Some people have no life left at fifty—or earlier—because they are so entangled, so shut in (or have allowed themselves to be shut in), that they have lost their freedom, and therefore their spontaneity, and in practice their life. Life and freedom belong together; they are kindred principles.

By new birth we have received life and been placed into liberty. So what is worse than death? To be subjected to principles one has not freely chosen, but which are imposed by others—by “the elements of the world,” for instance:

> “Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:” (Galatians 4:3)

How does a man end up in circumstances in which he is, in effect, already dead, though the doctor says he is alive? And how does he get his life back? Only by a very hard road—if it is possible at all. That is what the Preacher is dealing with.

“The sinner shall be taken by her”—before he dies. If death itself is pictured as a prison, then this is worse than death.

The awkward part is that this “more bitter than death” is called “the woman.” Many commentators quickly decide it must be an adulterous, unfaithful woman, because Scripture speaks widely about such. But that is not what is written here. “Whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands” is the description of trapping devices. It is a woman who takes her husband captive with snares, nets, and bands.

Then it says: “whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her.” In other words, her husband becomes her prisoner; and then it is said that one who pleases God will escape, but the sinner will be caught.

The Preacher will say later (verse 28) that this is “one among a thousand,” meaning very few men escape it—and therefore, on the other side, many women are like this. The idea is that the woman is often out to master her husband, so that the man cannot do what he would otherwise do. The Preacher calls it “more bitter than death” when men lose their freedom through marriage.

People often joke about it and do not take it seriously. But in the Bible it is treated as serious. By biblical standards it ought to be the other way round.
In the end it is, in the woman's case, a choice: do I keep him captive, or do I give him his freedom and encourage him to use that freedom? Many of the great men of history were, in one way or another, supported and encouraged in this by their wives. Without that, nothing would have come of it.
The Preacher's observation is simple: this is how it so often goes. It is one of the reasons why many lives go out like a candle in a draught. It produces disappointment for both. A woman does not truly enjoy living with a man who slavishly does what she says and shows no personal initiative. Some women complain and say, "The man I married was different." Then one is tempted to ask: why do you suppose he is not so now? Everything he does is met with interrogation, with being called to account—why he does it, whether it is right, and so on.
Wim Sonneveld sang about it in "Water bij de Wijn": the man has plans, but mother says no; he wants to go to the Gulf of Mexico, she says no—he gets a little house elsewhere. He remains a captive, in any case, as Sonneveld describes, and at the end of life that woman still reproaches him: "If you'd been a man…"—even though in practice he always listened to her. That is how it often goes.
These are caricatures, songs for entertainment, but they do make one think. Some have observed exactly what the Preacher observed.
Behind it all lies a wider picture: men and women often end up caught in the snares and bands of this old creation, which is presented as a woman. That women are thus—or behave thus—relates to the typological function they fulfil in creation: they express this visible world as such, and that world can be your friend or your enemy. It can be either. We must make use of it in the right way.

Ecclesiastes 7:27–28
"Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher, counting one by one, to find out the account:
Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found."
(Ecclesiastes 7:27–28)
"Behold, this have I found" continues into the middle of verse 28: "one man among a thousand have I found." As for the rest, people are taken captive and are, in effect, already deprived of their life and freedom before they actually die.
"Counting one by one" is about comparing things with one another: weighing the pros and cons, the positive and the negative, against each other in order to arrive at "the account"—the final reckoning, the concluding statement.
The Preacher says that his soul still seeks it. What, in one sentence, is the essence of life? What should one do or refrain from doing in order to be happy? How should one arrange one's life? Say it in a few words.

The Preacher says: I cannot do it. I have not got that far. But what I have found is this: “one man among a thousand” has found how he ought to live—how he ought to enjoy the good. The other nine hundred and ninety-nine simply stagger through life, bowed down under circumstances, frustrated because they have lost their freedom, in practice, through all sorts of causes. And so they let it be—and they do not truly live.

Ecclesiastes 7:29

“Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.” (Ecclesiastes 7:29)

This is the summary—the “account.” You may wonder what “inventions” are meant to be: the word is not one we use every day in this sense. It simply means things people devise—findings, notions, plans. In practice, the point is this: the word rendered “inventions” corresponds to the idea earlier rendered “the reason of things” an idea, a conclusion a person arrives at, a principle he makes his own and then lives by.

People invent a personal philosophy of life—and often allow themselves to be taken captive by it. You might call it “a find,” but only if there has been real reasoning leading up to it. For many it is not a reasoned conclusion at all, but merely a notion they have adopted and now cling to. Some find it far too difficult ever to think seriously, and so they operate by a simple private rule of thumb. The result is the same: they have “sought out many inventions.”

So: “God hath made man upright.” That does not mean God made man sinless in the moral sense. If it refers to sinlessness at all, it can only refer, at most, to Adam at his creation—and there it would stop. Yet we have just read:

> “For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.” (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

Is man then “upright” or not? Yes—and the answer lies along the line Paul explains in the latter part of Romans 7: when man must live under laws, under rules, nothing comes of it. Yet on the other hand, although man cannot in the flesh submit to the law as such, he can nevertheless, in the inward man—in the mind—consent to that same law which he cannot keep. It is by the route of faith that man is saved, justified, and receives eternal life. In that sense, there is nothing “wrong” with man as a creature in relation to God’s intended purpose.

Every human being is, by nature, capable of believing—and even inclined to it. That is how we begin life: trusting our parents, for instance. Some do not understand this and say, “Faith must be given to you,” and they tie it to a Calvinistic doctrine of election: that God rarely chooses someone for salvation, and so, if one must be saved by faith, God must first give him that faith. But that is a lie. Scripture calls man to believe; believing is not inherently difficult. What we must give up is self-confidence, and we must acknowledge God’s thoughts to be higher than our own:

> “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:9)

God says, as it were: listen diligently to Me, and I will teach you. But some do not want to learn; they fear it. Above all, they shrink from the responsibility that comes with knowledge.
So man, though “upright,” has “sought out many inventions”: evasions, schemes, rationalisations. Or, as Paul puts it:

> “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.” (Colossians 2:8)

People build their own doctrinal system, and then the Bible no longer fits into it. That is when things go truly wrong.
Man should stand in liberty:

> “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” (Galatians 5:1)

And if he seeks liberty, he also seeks truth—and then he finds it. Then he finds wisdom. That brings responsibility, but that is precisely what he needs; that is life. Even life in the old creation could be so—limited though it is. But as long as man goes on seeking “inventions,” creating his own fabrications, nothing comes of it.
Indeed, in practice man becomes his own prisoner: a prisoner of his own opinions. James says man is, in a sense, a slave of his own tongue—not even merely of what he hears, but of what he himself says. James 3 develops that: as a ship is directed by its helm, and a horse by its bit, so a man is steered by his tongue. Therefore:

> “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:” (James 1:19)

That theme already appeared in the opening verses of Ecclesiastes 5. Even if a man’s thoughts do not come out through his tongue, those thoughts can still take him captive. That is the tragedy.
So man is not sinless; yet he is “upright” in this sense: he is made fit to answer to the purpose God has for man—namely, that man is able to accept, by grace, the eternal life God offers him. Not through the flesh, not through his sinful nature, but through the mind.

Ecclesiastes 8

Above this chapter stands: “Reverence for the king and the authorities.” If I had to place a heading over it, I would say: “Reverence for the king—and for God,” that is, for authority including the Highest Authority. It is a recommendation of submission.
From chapter 5 onward the general exhortation is that man should be humble. Man is bound to the earth and should recognise that above the earth is a heaven higher than he is. Modesty suits him. Something similar appeared in chapter 7 as well: one should be modest and not strive after the very highest. No one is perfect, and if one strives in earnest to be so, one only brings misery upon oneself.
Here in chapter 8 we have much the same: in practice man is subject—also to human government. He must take account of it. If he wants to “see” the good, he must not provoke the one set above him. That is what

this chapter is about, with the familiar conclusion again at the end: one should enjoy the good.

Ecclesiastes 8:1

“Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man’s wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed.” (Ecclesiastes 8:1)

Verse 1 says that, in general, we do not know “the interpretation of a thing.” Therefore one should be modest and moderate—know one’s limitations.

In our day people often say, “We don’t know yet,” meaning, in effect: it will all come right; soon we will know everything. But in reality that is not so. We do not know, and we should be humble.

A man’s wisdom makes his face shine; the hardness, the sternness, the tightness of his face is changed. You can see it outwardly: a fixed, rigid face is often the expression of tension or uncertainty under which someone lives. And uncertainty comes from lack of wisdom. If one is wise, one has learned to deal with things, to meet circumstances.

That is why one can say, as the song puts it, “Because He lives…”—not merely that one “faces tomorrow” passively, but that one can meet it with open eyes, equipped and unafraid.

The wiser one is, the more one can relax, and laugh and weep. Wisdom gives a sense of humour, because one can put things in proportion. One learns not to take oneself so seriously, to see one’s own shortcomings and live with them. One learns that nothing in the world is perfect, that we are dependent on the earth and the situation down here. For the rest we commit ourselves to the Lord—certainly as believers. Then we have less to hide, less insecurity; emotions have room.

That is what is described: “a man’s wisdom maketh his face to shine.” Such a relaxed face is called “shining,” because it has an outward radiance. Someone can be positively glowing—and we recognise: there is light in him. And light is a synonym for wisdom. Hence the importance of wisdom if you want to enjoy the good of life. That is the subject here; and then come the practical counsels.

Ecclesiastes 8:2

“I counsel thee to keep the king’s commandment, and that in regard of the oath of God.” (Ecclesiastes 8:2)

The point is that one should take heed to “the king’s commandment”—and certainly to the commandment of God.

The “oath of God” is an utterance made with the mouth: words that stand fast. And if the words of the king, or higher still of God Himself, stand fast, then it is wise to reckon with them.

Hence:

> “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” (Romans 13:1)

Human government as such is, in principle, an institution ordained by God. Even believers are expected to submit. That is what one must learn.

To escape unqualified submission we have invented democracy. “Power to the people” is an unbiblical principle—an upside-down world—yet it is also the least bad form of government that exists, because it tends to be relatively stable, at least in Western countries. In a democracy the government must bend its ear to what the people want.
Normally, the government is set over us—hence it is called government. We are subject to it. One can do well to keep the king’s word—and higher still, the Word of God. If you carry the line through, the distance between king and God is not so great: at the end of history we arrive at the one King, and He is God. As far as we are concerned, He is our highest King, and we submit to Him more than to human authority:

> “Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

Ecclesiastes 8:3

“Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him.” (Ecclesiastes 8:3)
“Be not hasty to go out of his sight” means: do not turn your back on the king—or, ultimately, on God. Do not run away from the one set over you. If you do, you place the good in your life in serious danger.
If one would “see” the good, one should fear the authority (Romans 13 makes the same point). And one should not stubbornly persist “in an evil thing.” One must yield, because the king is king. He is stronger, and “he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him.” You may ask him something, perhaps, or consult him—but you must do so with caution.
Applied to prayer: if you come to God asking something, do not “stand… in an evil thing.” Consider whether the matter you bring might itself be “an evil thing.” If so, do not persist in it.
That is why I am an advocate of restraint in asking prayer. We should pray in harmony with God’s work and God’s will. We have the supreme example in the Lord Jesus Himself, who ended His prayer with:

> “Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” (Luke 22:42)

Above everything, that must govern. At the very least we should realise with whom—indeed, with Whom—we have to do: on the one hand the king, and ultimately God Himself.

Ecclesiastes 8:4

“Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?” (Ecclesiastes 8:4)
Where “the word of a king” penetrates and is heard—even by us—there he exercises his rule.
It is not for us to demand of him, “What are you doing to me?” And it is certainly not for us to call God to account. We are His workmanship. Paul states it sharply:

> “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?” (Romans 9:20)

He acts according to His will, and it is not ours to criticise. What is ours is to listen to His Word, that we might understand what He is doing. Authority belongs to the king—and in any case to God. We should reckon with that, as the next verses say.

Ecclesiastes 8:5

“Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing: and a wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment.” (Ecclesiastes 8:5)

Then nothing happens to you, if you simply keep the rules. Many Bibles cross-reference this to Romans 13, where the same point appears.

> “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:” (Romans 13:3)

New Testament teaching for the church is drawn from the same principles. In our times it still works similarly.

Yet note the subtle addition: “a wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment.” “Heart” can just as well be understood as mind; in Scripture the “inward man” is in view. He “discerns time and judgment”—and verse 6 explains what is meant.

Ecclesiastes 8:6

“Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.” (Ecclesiastes 8:6)

In other words: if you mean to do something—or refrain from something—you must choose the right circumstances. In many cases you must wait for them, but then not hesitate when the right moment presents itself. This reaches back to Ecclesiastes 3: “to every thing there is a season.” There is a time to be born, and a time to die, and so forth. I will not go back over it all now; but what was said there applies here as well.

One must choose the right circumstances. Wisdom has to do with knowing and choosing what one does or does not do. One must know the situation. And we should do this especially because “the misery of man is great upon him”: much human trouble comes upon man. Much can go wrong. Sometimes we must be cautious and waiting; but that should not prevent us, when the time is right, from doing what ought to be done. That, in practice, is what “the art of living” really amounts to.

Ecclesiastes 8:7

“For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?” (Ecclesiastes 8:7)

This is what makes life difficult—and it is precisely within that difficulty that one is meant to gain wisdom. It reaches back to the closing thought of chapter 6: who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun? You do not know what is coming, so enjoy what you have now.

Here in verse 7 the point is that one should wait for the right opportunity and, when necessary, take risks. Life is simply not otherwise.

Ecclesiastes 8:8

“There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war; neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it.” (Ecclesiastes 8:8)

For “spirit” you may read “thinking,” the “mind”—and that is difficult to control. People say, “Man is free to think what he likes.” I consider that nonsense. People often think things they do not want to think at all. That is the problem with thought: it goes in every direction. We are not nearly as free in our thinking as we imagine, and this verse says as much.

“There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit”—that is, to restrain it, to curb it. In that sense we are free: in the sense that no one can forbid you to think what you will.

But the Hebrew word for “spirit” (ruach) can also be understood as “life,” and that fits naturally, because the next clause speaks immediately about death: spirit over against death. You find something similar in 2 Corinthians 3, where the old covenant is characterised as a ministration of death and the new covenant as a ministration of the Spirit—death over against Spirit, that is, life.

“No man… hath power over the spirit” then means: no man has dominion over life “to retain the spirit,” because sooner or later he gives up the spirit—the breath—for the last time. “To give up the ghost” is the biblical expression; it stands opposite to “retain the spirit.” The thought is: no one has mastery over it.

And he has no mastery over death either: “neither hath he power in the day of death.” He knows that day is coming; he simply does not know when.

Not only does he have “no power in the day of death,” he also has “no discharge in that war”—that is, no release, no exemption, no defence that gets him out of the battle. “Neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it.” Whatever one does, one comes under it. That is how life is.

What remains is this: that in the time that is “left… in the flesh,” we should do the will of God while we can. The apostle Peter writes that this is the intention:

> “That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.” (1 Peter 4:2)

The time we have is today—the one thing we are reasonably sure of, at least up to this moment. So: seize the opportunities God gives you.

Ecclesiastes 8:9

“All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt.” (Ecclesiastes 8:9)

“There is a time”—that is, under certain conditions—when one man rules over another man. And it is “to his own hurt,” with harmful effect.

For that reason one should learn to make use of the opportunities one has, because there are times when those opportunities are not there—times when one man is controlled by others.

We usually call it “circumstances,” but in truth it is almost always “other people standing around you,” pressing in on you. That evil comes, one

way or another, because we are subject to many things that are higher than we are. That comes out in verses 10–11.

Ecclesiastes 8:10–11
“And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity.
Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.” (Ecclesiastes 8:10–11)
The idea of verse 10 is simply that the wicked die. “I saw the wicked buried” effectively means: they died, and therefore they were buried. In the same way, earlier (6:3) we read of someone who “had no burial”—that is, he did not die; he just carried on living.
Verse 10 connects with verse 8: “neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it.” They die too.
And the verse indicates that the same also happens to the righteous—here described in connection with “the place of the holy.” They “came and gone” from it: they went in and out. The “place of the holy” corresponds to what chapter 5 has called “the house of God,” the place one goes, preferably, to hear. Here, then, the thought is of righteous people who attend the temple—who serve God, for that is the underlying idea.
They come to the holy place and they go out again; they are, as it were, at home with the Lord. Yet they too “were forgotten in the city where they had so done.” They had done what was right in serving the Lord; nevertheless they too are forgotten—because they die. This is the parallel: on the one hand the wicked, buried and forgotten; on the other hand the righteous, likewise forgotten. They die as well and are buried too.
Of it all it is said: “this is also vanity.” The same things happen to righteous and wicked alike.
Verse 11 states plainly that judgment for evil is not immediate. God does not punish at once—and that creates the problem. Because sentence is not executed speedily, “the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.”
If you read it the other way round, the Preacher is saying: really, man ought to be punished straight away—then he would think twice next time. But because it does not happen at once, everything carries on. The link between crime and punishment is not made immediately; there is no swift intervention. In our own legal system it can take a very long time before anything is done, and in practice it no longer has the same effect because it takes too long.
Paul says something similar, in another connection:

> “But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God;
> Who will render to every man according to his deeds:” (Romans 2:5–6)

God will do it. As far as punishment—wrath—is due for evil, it is being “treasured up,” as though it were a store that increases more and more;

but it is revealed only “in the day of wrath,” the day of the revelation of God’s righteous judgment. That is why the hearts of the sons of men remain “fully set… to do evil”: they do not realise—or refuse to realise—that there truly will be judgment from God.

Ecclesiastes 8:12

“Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him:” (Ecclesiastes 8:12)

This too means that judgment upon the sinner comes later, not at once; in the meantime he continues to live, even while doing evil “an hundred times.”

But one cannot simply slip out of it. One may die, but that does not mean one escapes God’s judgment—only that it comes later, in the day of judgment.

It also means there is, later, reward for those “that fear God.” That is not to say the Lord would never bless us in this life. The Preacher does say: “it shall be well with them that fear God.” The Psalmist says it many times as well—for example:

> “For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth.
> For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be.
> But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.” (Psalm 37:9–11)

That both the wicked and the righteous may experience similar things in this life tells you nothing decisive by itself. And conversely, we cannot claim blessings from the Lord merely because we are believers. There is a truth in it, but it lies at a higher level than merely being a child of God. Where we serve the Lord, He will give what we need for His service. That guarantee we have. But for ordinary, general life as such, we have not been given blanket promises.

What truly binds believers together is not merely that they are “believers,” nor even that they all hold the same set of teachings, but their devotion to the Lord. That is where unity is found. Differences in teaching are, in practice, unavoidable; little can be done about that. It is not ideal, but it is how it is—so long as our lives are placed at His disposal. As His servants we are “worthy” of provision; and all His servants He supplies with what is needed for the service.

So if you want the Lord’s blessing upon your life, there is no other way: set your life—practically, in full—to His disposal.

Ecclesiastes 8:13

“But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.” (Ecclesiastes 8:13)

Notice the contrast with verse 12, where the translators, by their supplied words, attribute the prolonging of the sinner’s days to God. Yes—who else

would it be? Yet verse 13 says the wicked man's days will not, in the end, be prolonged.
The only conclusion is that verse 13 speaks of the future—of the day of judgment. Then his days are not prolonged. Then he disappears, and then it "shall be well with them that fear God."
"The wicked… are as a shadow, because he feareth not before God." A shadow does not fare well after that day. Scripture teaches that the new creation is wholly permeated with light; there is no darkness there. Light—and thus life—penetrates everything.
In this present life one should not assume the righteous will necessarily prosper more than the wicked. What makes the difference, in practice, is whether one is wise or not. The distinction is not simply "believer versus unbeliever," but "wise versus foolish." A wise man is, in principle, a righteous man—those belong together—though not every "wise" man is at once a believer. Yet if he continues on the path of wisdom, he will certainly become one; and some stop walking that path because they will not accept the consequences.
Also, many believers do not live wisely in practice, and there are unbelievers who are very good at choosing "time and judgment"—that is, the right moment and the right way. The Preacher has already said elsewhere that, in many respects, "all… have one event."

Ecclesiastes 8:14
"There is a vanity which is done upon the earth; that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous: I said that this also is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 8:14)
Here you have it stated plainly: the "rule" one might imagine from the earlier verses does not hold as a guaranteed principle. People cannot make claims. This is strong medicine.
There are righteous people to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked, and wicked people to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous. Psalm 73 speaks about this very tension—for instance that the wicked can appear to have ease and increase in riches.
So in this world, both "sides" do not get what they "deserve." We should understand from this that the general situation on earth is that man is, in many respects, left to his lot. Scripture does not teach that our lives are mechanically determined from above—not the lives of the wicked, and not the lives of the righteous either.
Scripture does teach that the Lord cares for us where we serve Him. If you want that care and provision in practical terms, then set your whole life, in all its aspects, at His disposal.
The point is that man is not a machine, nor merely prey to "higher forces." In some religions and cultures people imagine man is subject to cosmic powers and unseen forces, and that breeds fatalism, passivity, indifference, and emptiness—because that is what fatalism becomes in practice.
And where people refuse responsibility and hand it over to "higher powers," it is to be feared they drift toward the devil and his instruments.

The basic biblical truth is that the world lies in the power of “the wicked one.” As John writes:

> “And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.” (1 John 5:19)

And in that connection Satan is called “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Ecclesiastes 8:15

“Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

What this whole book keeps circling back to is that we, as men, should learn to be humble—not striving after the “high things,” because we overreach ourselves and come to grief. We are small creatures, bound to the earth, bound to all manner of powers and forces, and even bound (at times) to men who are stronger and “higher” than we are.

It is not our calling to reach the highest. That notion is a deception, and the Devil’s invention. (The text itself alludes to Isaiah 14:13, but you asked for exact KJV wording only where Scripture is quoted—so I’m not inserting a paraphrase here.) The Lord Jesus identified that same spirit as devilish—“Ye are of your father the devil” (John 8:44)—where men imagine they too must place their throne as high as possible.

Rather, we should take our pattern from that Man whom we know as the revelation of the Being of God—He who made Himself known as the humble One, the servant—and we should walk in His steps.

And what remains, then, is exactly what the verse says: therefore I commended gladness, because man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, to drink, and to be merry. It comes down to caring for oneself—and that is that. By human standards it sounds unambitious; yet this is what life truly holds for us: eating, drinking, and gladness.

Only, for some reason man is always pushing it into the future—spending his whole life chasing it, and then never truly arriving. One should have it today.

Personally, in this connection, I have difficulty with what is commonly called “Christian politics.” It is aimed at power—and that is not the intention at all, and can never be the intention. The intention is that the Lord Jesus Christ will come to power—not through us now, but in the future, in the days of His coming again. As long as He is the rejected One, the despised One, we share His position. That does not make us miserable; we are glad, because we know how it will end—and we have time, for we have eternal life.

People who are glad are sympathetic; you can live with them; you feel at home with them. So we ought to go through life that way. Man has nothing better “under the sun,” and “that shall abide with him of his labour.” “Labour” in Scripture is heavy toil—sweat and strain. That is true even in the service of the Lord, and precisely for that reason it yields gladness. The privilege of serving the Lord is the finest thing there is; it gives joy.

And note the expression again: “the days of his life.” It is always only **one day at a time**. We should use and value the days of our life which “God giveth… under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes 8:16
“When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:)” (Ecclesiastes 8:16)
That is the other side of the story. Man’s labour—his “business”—is, at least as the Preacher practised it, in large measure directed toward acquiring wisdom. Yet increasingly you see men directed toward outward things only.
People scarcely think anymore, because they are not given the chance: so much “information” must be swallowed every day—newspapers, radio, television news, the internet, constant checking. Call it information if you like; in reality it produces little understanding. A sense for nuance disappears. Language itself is no longer grasped—let alone the language of Scripture. It becomes all “surface.”
Men no longer seek wisdom or truth in practice; they follow trends and ready-made lines that advertising and propaganda hand to them. Thinking things through is pushed out altogether.
But man’s business ought, first and foremost, to be “to know wisdom.” The Preacher says he “applied [his] heart”—that is, his inner man—to see the business done on earth, with the intention of understanding it. And what he saw was this: “there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes.” Men are busy; they do not rest; and in that very busyness they do not truly arrive at wisdom. That is precisely what the last verse of the chapter makes plain.

Ecclesiastes 8:17
“Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea farther; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.” (Ecclesiastes 8:17)
Mark the repeated phrase: “find out.” Man may observe many things, but he cannot penetrate them, cannot truly grasp why things are as they are. A man “labour[ing] to seek it out… shall not find it.”
And it even says: if “a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.” If a man says he is wise, the chances are he is not; he has just proved the opposite. For if a man is wise—and cannot find it out by himself—how does he know it?
I deliberately refuse the common, fashionable “Christian” misuse of this verse. People love to take it as: What is truth? You can’t know; you can’t find it out; therefore close your Bible. They drag in phrases like “we know in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9) and “God’s thoughts are higher,” and so on—using a handful of words to excuse unbelief and intellectual laziness.
But that is not what the Preacher is talking about. He is not speaking of studying the Word of God. He is speaking of trying to derive the essence of things from watching “the business… done upon the earth,” the work

“done under the sun,” in general. His point is: if you study that—mere observation of life and human activity—you will not reach the essence; you will not arrive at wisdom and meaning. If you only look around you, you will not find these things.
Yet Scripture teaches that we **can** know the meaning of things—if we will listen to God’s Word. We do not “find it out” for ourselves, but we do “find it” in the Bible.
So we should listen to the Word of God—read it, study it. And Scripture teaches that when we cannot, God opens ears for that very purpose: He opens eyes, ears, and heart—if the man truly wants to understand. Then God removes the veil, and His Word can penetrate.

> “Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live;” (Isaiah 55:3)

Come to the Lord to listen to Him—and you will truly “live,” you will revive. That is what is said.

Ecclesiastes 9:1
“For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them.” (Ecclesiastes 9:1)
Verse 1 shows that what is laid up in the heart becomes wholly plain and clear for “the righteous”—that is, “the wise.” If they are righteous, it is because faith is counted for righteousness: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Romans 4:3).
Then one is “in the hand of God”—and not only that, but also “their works” are in the hand of God. That means God will, in the future, recompense, as chapter 8 has already indicated: the wicked will ultimately come into judgment, and God will render to every man according to his deeds.
Yet it remains that in this present life it appears otherwise, and Ecclesiastes 9 is about that: the righteous (believers) suffer, in general, the same troubles as unbelievers. And “no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them”—that is, from what a man can see now, he cannot conclude what the rest of his life will look like.
For reassurance and clarity: both Old Testament and New Testament believers are safe in God’s hand. Whatever happens, every promise God has made, He will fulfil.

Ecclesiastes 9:2
“All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.” (Ecclesiastes 9:2)
“All things come alike to all.” The rest of the verse explains: the same sort of things “happen” to righteous and wicked, and so on. Whether a man is a believer or an unbeliever does not exempt him; nor—even as the text sets it out—does mere outward living.

In our day we are constantly being told what is “bad for you,” what is “good for you,” what you must do, must not do, must eat, must never eat. Christians add a “Christian” veneer to it—because Christians so often simply follow the world, only a few years late: your body is a temple, so you must only eat this and never that. But it is largely nonsense. Scripture speaks differently: it is not preoccupied with how long we live, but whether we serve the Lord in our life, however long it is. And Scripture teaches plainly that a man is not defiled by what goes into him, but by what comes out of him—through the mouth:

> “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” (Matthew 15:11)

We may still have practical reasons for dietary caution, but the point is: Scripture is dealing with other matters entirely.

Ecclesiastes states that our lives, and the content of our lives, are not chiefly determined by ourselves; what “happeneth” to us is largely determined by circumstances. That idea is unpopular, and everywhere people try to reason it away—usually with religious arguments. They want to escape the statement (found later in this chapter) that “time and chance happeneth to them all,” because it produces a feeling of uncertainty. So Christians are taught: there is no chance; the Lord controls everything in the world, or at least in your life. Many religions teach the same: that you are a small part of the cosmos and chance does not exist. But how we pass through the circumstances—how we deal with them—has to do with knowledge, wisdom, and understanding the Word of God. What matters is to know that despite “chance,” despite circumstances, we are nevertheless children of God; ultimately it cannot go wrong. We have One who cares for us—provided that we seek to serve Him. Yet it does not exempt us from the circumstances spoken of here.

Ecclesiastes 9:3

“This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.” (Ecclesiastes 9:3)

What verse 2 described is not merely “vanity,” but “an evil”—“among all things that are done under the sun,” without distinction.

The Preacher’s conclusion is that “the heart of the sons of men is full of evil,” and that in their life there is “madness… in their heart.” Put those statements in parallel and you see: “evil” is “madness,” and “heart” is life. Our life is not simply what we do; it is what we think. Our life is our experience—how we process things, how we view them, what motivates us. That is life as we actually live it.

This verse says the inward man is “full of evil,” life is full of “madness,” and men occupy themselves with it. “And after that they go to the dead.” Afterward all these “sons of men” are gathered into the realm of the dead, waiting for the day of judgment.

Here Ecclesiastes teaches that we are subject to circumstances—and even subject to our own evil heart. Therefore the New Testament teaches that we, as children of God, should fill our hearts with the Word of God; then

something changes. The Word of God, the Holy Spirit in us, changes the heart, so that it is not full of madness and evil, but filled with the life of Christ. That is the New Testament complement to what is said here.

Ecclesiastes 9:4
“For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion.” (Ecclesiastes 9:4)
Verse 3 said men go to the dead; verse 4 says that for now we are still “joined… to all the living.” For one still in the land of the living there is hope—namely the hope that “tomorrow may be better.”
But for the natural man it does not truly get better; it does not become good; it can only deteriorate, and then hope collapses. Religion then tries to teach him to make peace with it—sometimes even saying that death “belongs” to life, as though two absolute opposites belong together.
Still, as long as one lives, there is “hope,” because “a living dog is better than a dead lion.” A lion is “worth” more than a dog, but if you must choose, better a living dog. Why? Verse 5 answers.

Ecclesiastes 9:5
“For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.” (Ecclesiastes 9:5)
As far as man knows anything certain about the unchanging realities, what does he know? Essentially this: he will die. What he does not know is when.
Opposed to the living man’s knowledge stands: “the dead know not any thing.” That is often misunderstood. In the older idiom of these texts, the emphasis is that the dead have nothing more to do with “the whole”—with the world and its affairs. They are cut off from it, and therefore they “know” nothing of it.
This verse is sometimes misused to support the teaching of “soul sleep”—the notion that after death one is unconscious until resurrection. But that is reading more into the phrase than the Preacher is saying here.
Do the dead truly “know” nothing at all? No—at the very least there is memory. The biblical idea of “knowing” is not mere information, but being involved, having a part in. The living not only “know” they will die as a fact; they must live with it and it plays into their daily life. The dead, by contrast, are outside the ongoing affairs: they have no participation in “the whole.”
And so: “neither have they any more a reward,” because they do nothing more here; the term is over. Whatever remembrance there is among surviving contemporaries fades quickly: “the memory of them is forgotten.”

Ecclesiastes 9:6
“Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 9:6)

Here we are essentially back at verse 1. “Envy” means jealousy. Love, hatred, jealousy—all of it is perished, and with it all striving, ambition, pushing.
Within a short time it is all over, and from that point “the dead know not any thing” in the sense already explained: “neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.” Scripture interprets itself: not that they “exist as nothing,” but that they have no share, no participation, in what goes on here.
And now comes the frequently repeated conclusion in Ecclesiastes—which begins at verse 7.

Ecclesiastes 9:7
“Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.” (Ecclesiastes 9:7)
“Go thy way” assumes that we turn our backs on the world as such. What characterises the world—certainly since the descriptions in Genesis 11—is that it seeks what is “higher”; it tries to climb, preferably into heaven itself. Since time immemorial some great building projects have served as a symbolic picture of that: man, as it were, tries to storm heaven and rise above himself. Nothing comes of it, but it is still the world’s hallmark.
And when a man finally discovers it does not work—when he cannot get any further, and learns it is all pointless—he has usually reached the age when he is pushed aside, because he no longer fits the system. He is no longer “ambitious” enough. He has at last learned what reality is. That can take decades; but by the time he has learned it, he is “written off,” because he no longer suits the world. In the world you must go forward, always better, always higher—there must be “development.” No development? Then at least change. People have even invented a philosophy that change, by definition, equals improvement.
The point is that if we “eat [our] bread with joy, and drink [our] wine with a merry heart,” then God already has pleasure in our works, because God values it when we gladly make use of what He gives—bread and wine. These stand for eating and drinking, and that, in turn, is a figure for the whole of life. One should go through life with gladness, and also seek that gladness. That is what the Lord expects of us.
Notice too: it does not say, “God accepteth thy labour,” but “God… accepteth thy works.” He may well take pleasure in our labour, but that is not the point here. “Works” are simply what one does. And if one learns to enjoy life, to appreciate the good of life, to recognise it as good, and even to thank the Lord for it—for that is what it comes to—then God has pleasure in that. A chapter earlier we already read that when man must give account to God Himself, this is bound up with it in an important way: did you enjoy the life you were given at all? did you make something of it?

Ecclesiastes 9:8
“Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.” (Ecclesiastes 9:8)

And then consider how a large part of Christendom—claiming to believe in the Word of God and in the Bible—commonly goes through life dressed in black, head bowed, face drawn tight. They go through life “in the gloomy black,” and for that choice they often appeal especially to the Psalms. But that is something quite different from: “eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart” (v. 7), and it is also the opposite of: “Let thy garments be always white.”

“Black” speaks of mourning and sorrow, and Scripture certainly speaks of mourning. But here it is clear that “white” speaks of festivity. There are seven principal colours, but black and white are not among them; black and white are not colours. Black is the absence of colour—really, the absence of light. Colour belongs to light, and where there is no light, there is no colour. White is the mingling of all colours in due proportion.

We have no excuse for not being glad, and for not taking our bread and wine with gladness. That there is an allusion to “bread and wine” is beyond doubt, but it does not refer only to the Lord’s Supper. The Supper does express the same truths: the life God has given us in Christ. We should live that life with gladness, conscious that our days in this world are limited—and for that very reason we should enjoy them the more, and realise that all the days of our vain life are precious. That is what this book says. It is very optimistic: it points out the relative nature of the world and of life as such; it points us to what truly matters in life. Not all the bustle, not all man’s pride, but the good things of life which we receive from the Lord and ought to value. And if anything is healthy for you, it is that.

“Let thy head lack no ointment.” Ointment (oil) is a figure of eternal life. Oil is also used in the making of bread. Oil from the olive tree—so long-lived, so often seen as enduring—becomes an emblem of life that does not perish. That is why the Old Testament high priest Aaron and his successors were anointed with oil at their consecration. The anointing points beyond itself: to the true High Priest, after the order of Melchisedec, who became such “after the power of an endless life.”

And “fragrance” speaks of spiritual—unseen—things. Hence, “we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ.” The fragrant oil is a figure of that: of eternal life, and thus of joy.

So, “Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment” is, in effect, nothing other than: enjoy life.

Ecclesiastes 9:9

“Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 9:9)

The thought is that a wife boosts enjoyment. I do not mean that in a crude sense; it is simply that it is not good for man to be alone. It lifts the joy of living. Wives and husbands alike would do well to realise that.

“All the days of the life of thy vanity”—I find that a splendid expression. Considering society, it is almost humour. We are back at the beginning of the book: “vanity,” vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas—“Vanity of vanities… all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). It remains so. Visible life here,

as such, without God and without the unseen world, is utterly empty. Even for believers, our earthly life is a “vain life.”
So what does the Lord want us to do with practical life? Perform grand, lofty achievements? Improve the world? Convert the world? Not at all. Eat and drink; keep white garments; and live joyfully with the wife you love—because God has given you “all the days of thy vanity,” here “under the sun.”
This is about earthly, visible things—things the sun literally shines upon. That is why the emphasis falls on “vanity,” and especially on the “days” a man lives. The point is indeed: it is one day at a time. We should not live so far ahead; we live today; we should live “by the day”—Carpe Diem. Life is vain, yet day by day we ought to be conscious of time, opportunities, and moments given to us by God. We should be glad, and thank the Lord when things go well, knowing it is not always so: it was not always so, and it will not always remain so. All the more reason to be aware that we live now—even as children of God.

> “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12)

Day in, day out—not by the year, but by the day. “For that is thy portion in this life.” That is, this is what is allotted to you; there is not more of it here. Some people find that too little; it suits me very well. Personally I cannot bear the thought that I must strive in society, in “the system,” to reach something. I have never felt at home in it. I mean that seriously—perhaps because I grew up from childhood with the Bible. In any case, I am glad it is not required. You do not have to “become something.” You simply have to live, and find genuine enjoyment in what you are doing. The word “portion” in the KJV often carries the idea of a gift—something given, something shared. Our portion, what is allotted to us, what is given to us in this life, is to enjoy our labour under the sun. And “labour” is heavy work, as we have said before. Life is hard; it costs sweat, and sometimes tears; and for that very reason we should enjoy what we can. And perhaps the most important statement is verse 10.

Ecclesiastes 9:10
“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” (Ecclesiastes 9:10)
Notice it does not say “whatever is assigned to you,” but “whatsoever thy hand findeth to do.” The last sentence reaches back to the first part of this section: that is where man is heading. With that in mind, if a man is going to do something, he should do it while he is still in the strength of life. He should do it with full intention, with wholeheartedness—“with thy might.” That is, in fact, the essence of our human existence. It is the point of it all. Why? What makes a man happy? What gives peace? The answer, again and again in Ecclesiastes and also in the New Testament, is that the child of God throws himself into the work with full devotion. That brings liberation. It is also the heart of what the law expresses:

> “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?
> Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy

heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.
This is the first and great commandment.” (Matthew 22:36–38)

So whatever you do, you do it with that intent. That is what matters, and it brings peace—and thus gladness. That is how believers go through life and serve the Lord: with complete commitment, with all that lies within our ability (“thy might”). We have given ourselves to Him, and that gives joy.

The New Testament says the same principle plainly:

> “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;” (Colossians 3:23)

Now then: as a believer—born again child of God—what does “whatsoever thy hand findeth to do” mean? Still not “what you are ordered to do,” and not “the law.” John says it is to love the brethren; that is the natural outworking of Christ’s life in us. Love means service, and it may even show itself in very practical, material ways, according to earthly circumstances.

And this is not “vanity.” God rewards it, as Ecclesiastes itself keeps bringing out.

> “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Ecclesiastes 9:10 says: “for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” The thought is simple again: if we are to do anything according to the will of God, we should do it while we live.

Not in death, not in the realm of the dead—though we as believers do not go there, because we are already “made… sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” That does not change. At most we disappear from the earth; but as to our standing, we are already in heaven in Christ.

But the point is: if one is to praise the Lord, it is done while one has breath. One should come to surrender, to faith, in this life—not later. Whether later is possible or not is beside the point. While one is here, in this world under the sun, in this “vain life,” one should seek the truth, and that Truth will make itself known. The Lord reveals Himself.

Ecclesiastes 9:11

“I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

If you ask me, a very long section follows from here—running from this verse through to chapter 11, verse 8. Its chief drift is that it is better to be wise than strong. That is a theme we have already met from Ecclesiastes 3: what a man does, and what he achieves, depends on the concurrence of circumstances—“chance”—and that is bound up with “time.”

Here Ecclesiastes 9 says it is not necessarily the swift who win the race. A man may be a fine fighter, but whether you win the battle depends on more than that. And so too: “neither yet bread to the wise.” You would think a wise man could always make a living. Not necessarily. The same

applies to “riches to men of understanding.” You might suppose that if someone is very sensible he will soon be rich; Ecclesiastes says no—because it is not necessarily the sensible who become rich. Perhaps it is sensible not to. Perhaps circumstances are such that, with all your understanding, you still cannot pull it off, because the opportunity simply is not there. “Nor yet favour to men of skill”—the same principle applies: “time and chance happeneth to them all.”

Whether one “gets somewhere” in life—at any level—is partly determined by what one can do, but equally limited by what one cannot do, for any number of reasons. I know a very good musician; he leads a decent band, but it will never “break through” because he cannot present it—because he does not look the part. He plays superbly, but it is not enough to “make something of it.” You need presence, a bit of charisma on stage, and business sense besides, to keep the whole thing afloat. I also know someone who knows a great deal of the Bible; I learn from him at times. But it never comes to much in practice: the man cannot speak fluently. He takes too long choosing words, they do not come; he stalls and loses the audience. More than one thing is required to accomplish something.

At the very least we have the responsibility to make the right choice. God calls us as capable of doing that. If we do not, we are fully accountable; if we do, there is reward. But that takes place within “time and chance”—that is, circumstances we did not arrange, and that God did not “arrange” in the simplistic sense people often mean. Within such circumstances we must make decisions and determine our course.

We were called to that when the gospel was preached to us. And as children of God the call remains: “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.” He enables us to do so. He gives what we need to serve Him. And where we lack strength—and we always do—He supplies it, and His strength is made perfect in weakness. Our responsibility is to remain faithful to the Lord in all circumstances.

Time and chance have great weight in what we become and what becomes of us—certainly in the eyes of men, and in important ways even for us as believers. We ourselves are, in earthly terms, also the product of “chance,” of one thing and another coming together. Within who we are, we are to live our own life, and for that, God rewards.

And our service to the Lord is not merely “telling other people the gospel” as though that were the whole of it. That is part of it, but some imagine serving the Lord means bringing as many as possible to faith, as though each convert earns you a crown. That is naïve. Nor can one measure, in any objective way, how well someone served the Lord. That is not how it works.

What it truly comes to is this: our calling here on earth, while we are still in the flesh, is that the life of Christ in us should be planted, grow, and develop—that we should receive the mind of Christ, that we should be transformed in the inner man. That is our service to Him. The New Testament letters teach that the Lord expects us to give form to the Word that dwells in our hearts.

Ecclesiastes 9:12
“For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.”
The intention, of course, is that we—“the sons of men” (literally, “of Adam”)—should recognise “the evil time”. Fish and birds do not. We human beings are expected to understand circumstances, to recognise what is happening, and then to know whether to act—or whether to refrain. That is, in fact, the art of living. That is wisdom, and it is what distinguishes us from animals.
It also means seizing opportunities when they present themselves, because you do not know whether another opportunity will come. It is as simple as that. In practice it means that a significant part of our life cannot be planned, and that means that sometimes you must do things at moments you were not prepared for. Hymn 166 (Joh. de Heer), “Grijp toch de kansen” (“Seize the opportunities”), says: if you meet someone who is open to the gospel, you should bring him to the gospel; but it applies to the whole of life. When you get an opportunity, you must take it while you can. That is also what the Preacher says. If you truly want something, and you have the means and the opportunity, then do it as soon as possible. Do not put it off until tomorrow, because you do not know whether it will still be possible then—whether you will still have the chance, whether you will live long enough, remain healthy long enough, remain free enough, or still have the same possibilities.
If today is too difficult, and you can bear to wait, then wait for a better opportunity; but that has little to do with “planning” as such. The plans we may make—even in our Christian life—should not be treated as absolute. You must leave room for circumstances, and certainly also for the work of the Holy Spirit.
The next verses provide a splendid illustration.

Ecclesiastes 9:13–15
“This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it seemed great unto me:
There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it:
Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.”
A very important truth (“a great wisdom”) is set before us here, namely: if you are not strong, you must be wise. It is an obvious truth that the issue is not strength or power, but wisdom. Here it is called “a poor wise man”. And it is immediately added: “yet no man remembered that same poor man”, because in the world wisdom is generally not truly valued, even though people know they need it. In the world, money, power (strength), and wealth are considered more important. If someone is wise and at the same time poor, nobody listens. It is like “a little city, and few men within it”. You cannot see wisdom, and man sees only “what is before the eyes”. “Do ye look on things after the outward appearance?” (2 Corinthians

10:7). But God looks on the heart—and it is there that wisdom should be found.
Man needs wisdom, but in essence that is faith. The book before this one (Proverbs) teaches that if you want to become wise, you must, first of all, be with the Lord. Believers understand that it is not about wealth and power—because you lose those things anyway—but about knowing the Lord; about knowing the Truth. And where our lives are safe with our Lord—of course in eternal life, for in this life all sorts of things can still happen to us—we are able to do what we must do without power and without wealth. Then we are no longer driven to accomplish something "great" in this world. Why should we be? That appears to be the biblical principle. I say that with great caution, because we are dealing with people's outlook on life, their feelings, and their personal circumstances. But this conclusion seems to me to be justified:
Matthew 6:19–21
"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:
But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:
For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."
Luke 12:16–21
"And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully:
And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?
And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods.
And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.
But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?
So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."
We should fill our heart—and therefore our life—with His truth, and live out of it. The wisdom we receive from it we should use for our practical life. In practice that means that we, though sinners and subject to death, are nevertheless delivered from the dominion of him who "had the power of death". (Hebrews 2:14). As free children of God we walk about on the earth—and that is to the honour of the Lord. That is what true riches produce. Thus we are "accepted". (Ephesians 1:6). And in connection with Ecclesiastes 9:14 and 15, that is the outcome of the word of "that poor wise man", who "by his wisdom delivered the city". Do you not recognise the Lord Jesus in that? He came to earth and became poor in order to make us rich. If ever there was a man wise throughout the course of history, it was certainly the Lord Jesus.
"But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God." and "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30).
Colossians 2:3
"In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

The world knows strength, power, and wealth, but that does not amount to much. The wisdom of God, however, does—and it is expressed in Christ. He is that Wisdom of God. The simple biblical truth, then, is that we should love the Lord, because for us He has been “made … wisdom”. If we can use that wisdom for others, so much the better; but first it is our personal possession, and then our personal responsibility.
So what this passage is about is this: a man should know time and chance, and by his wisdom make use of them, so that he is not caught when “the evil time” falls upon him suddenly. Verse 15 concludes with: “yet no man remembered that same poor man”. Lazarus too was the proverbial poor man over against the rich man—the beggar over against the rich man—and it is said: “If one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.” But the answer is:
“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from **the dead.”** (Luke 16:30–31).
That points to the true Lazarus—Eleazar—the Lord Jesus, the High Priest of the New Covenant: Wisdom itself. And yet that Wisdom is not honoured in this world. Strength is honoured; and then the text continues:

Ecclesiastes 9:16
“Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.”
If it had been the wisdom of a rich man, people might well have listened to him and honoured him. But that is not the case here, because he was poor. We shall come back to that, for Ecclesiastes 10 also says something about it.

Ecclesiastes 9:17
“The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.”
“Quiet” in this passage is evidently the opposite of strength—also often the opposite of wealth, but in any case of strength. What is needed is quietness—rest. At the very least a man must be silent in order to listen and to think matters through. You cannot do that if you are talking at the same time. We have already paused over this earlier, in connection with Ecclesiastes 5:1: one should be “more ready to hear”. One should draw near to the Lord, to “the house of God”, not so much to bring offerings, but first of all to listen to the Lord.
That is how it is in our day as well. What I have always run up against are believers who say: “You with your Bible study all the time. It is not practical. We at least do something. We do all sorts of things for the Lord.” That falls precisely into this category: always bringing “offerings”—or whatever passes for it—while the first thing is to listen to the Lord, so that His Word may come into our heart. He fills our empty hearts. He shines with His light into our dark hearts. (2 Corinthians 4:6). So one must have rest in order to be taught. That is worth more than “the cry of him that ruleth among fools”.
It is a wonderful statement, precisely because it is so short. The thought is that wisdom is not preached by raising the voice. It should be listened to

in quietness. The speaking of wisdom also happens in quietness. Wisdom is not communicated by rhetoric, or by shouting, or by all that goes with it. Rabble-rousing works that way. The one who cries out like that, and thereby “ruleth among fools”, is himself foolish. Only outward things are achieved by it. If you want to set people to work, you must do it by force, by raising the voice. If you tell a dog, “Lie down,” it will often not do it; you must speak plainly and make it clear you are the master, otherwise the animal does nothing. The same is true of people, said a corporal. In the army all commands are shouted; someone has thought that through. Strong, powerful voices give a strong command. But wisdom can be passed on only to a receptive heart. Shouting closes hearts. Violence helps in no way.

That is why, by God’s doing, we have been brought into rest, and then taught in that rest. As long as we “have to” do everything and live under “commandments”—that is, under the law—there is no room for instruction, for truth, for insight. If you have a book full of prescriptions, you no longer need to be wise; you simply do what the prescriptions say, and that is that. That was how it was in military service: you did what you were told, and you left the thinking to others. Thinking for yourself was, in effect, forbidden—personal initiative too. That belongs to service in the army.

But human beings in general have been called to freedom—believers especially. In that sense we have been delivered from “service”. After that, responsibility lies with ourselves. In order to make and carry our own decisions, we are taught “in quietness”. Rest is needed, not only to be taught, but also to teach. If that rest is not there, the truth is quickly distorted by the tensions that are present. Therefore one should be taught when the tensions are not there, when one is detached from the daily cares of life. That is the idea.

That is why teaching children works so well. What children learn at a young age they do not forget for the rest of their life—however much they might later wish to. It settles in them, because they still have rest and therefore can listen. Later a person thinks too much about all sorts of matters, and by that very thing closes himself off to what comes to him. So we should seek rest. The Lord has called us to it—and then we can hear the words of the wise in quietness.

Ecclesiastes 9:18

“Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.”

The word “sinner” in this verse should be replaced with what it actually means. “To sin” is “to miss”—to miss the mark. It is not a hit; it misses. That is sin. The word “sinner” here should be understood as “a misfire”, “a blunder”, “a missed shot”. It does not even have to be a person; it can also be a thing. Once you read it as “a blunder”, the verse becomes immediately clear. “Weapons of war” stands for “strength”. And there is also the word “one”: in reality, the point is simply this—one misstep destroys much good. A man may be ever so wise; wisdom is more important than strength or weapons, but if there is even one blunder in it,

much is immediately ruined. Something like: a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.
So one should always pay attention and remain watchful, throughout life. One should be aware of the position one is in, and not want to make mistakes. But people do make mistakes. One mistake is worse than another. And what is being stated here is that a single mistake can undermine the whole matter. You can have a splendid plan, but if one part goes wrong, the whole plan collapses. This is a warning.
It also means that wisdom is a relative thing. It is difficult to be wise at all times, and nobody is truly wise. And so we are back again at the whole theme of Ecclesiastes: whatever man does or undertakes, something always goes wrong. That is repeated in chapter 10 as well. Verse 1 follows directly from it.

Ecclesiastes 10:1
“Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour.”
The word “folly” corresponds to the word translated “fools” in Ecclesiastes 9:17. We even recognise it via English as “silly”. The meaning is immediately clear. It is not “foolish” in the sense of lacking intelligence—that is never the meaning—but foolish in the sense that a person does not think. He does not use his brain, even though he has one. That is the whole idea. “Silly” is, in effect, a description of a certain type: a good-natured simpleton without perseverance—the sort you cannot really get moving. He takes things as they are and thinks everything is fine. If you want something done, he can be used for it, but you must keep an eye on him, because he has little drive, and if things go against him he gives up. In reality, this is a form of fatalism. You find it in people without perseverance—people who are lazy, or who say, “God will sort it out,” and “If God wills it… he will have a purpose in it.” It becomes an argument for being lazy, or for doing nothing.
Verse 1 is in fact the explanation of Ecclesiastes 9:18, but in symbolic form. The thought is that you may prepare a fragrant ointment—do it ever so well—but if one wrong little thing gets into it, you can throw the whole ointment away. “Dead flies” are the picture of that one “blunder”. Through that one “sin” it goes wrong. “A little folly” means: a small lack of wisdom. The sense is: a little folly can make a man—who is precious for wisdom and honour—give off a stench, so to speak; it puts him in a bad light. A man only has to make one mistake and thereby lose his whole reputation. That happens often. In politics you see it repeatedly: people do or say one thing wrong, and it is often immediately the end of their career.
In our lives it can be like that too. We make one wrong decision, and it has very great consequences. Under certain circumstances—on the road, for example—it can even be fatal. It is a warning, but even more, I think, it is simply stating a fact. That is how it goes, and we should take such things into account: seeing the relativity of all things, so that we do not become proud.

This is not a plea to do nothing at all. Doing nothing is the greatest mistake you can make. If you do nothing, you do not live. If life is to bring you anything—even if only the joy and peace Ecclesiastes speaks of—then it can only do so if you do something for it. Man is simply made in such a way that he must do something, otherwise he breaks down. Like machines that must be used: then they have a reasonably long life, and so it is with man. People who have remained active throughout their lives often have much energy; that is why they grow old. On the other hand, I cannot shake the impression that people who stop living do not live much longer. Why should they? Life has lost its content by then. They merely vegetate, letting things happen. That is remarkably unhealthy for body and mind. So one should remain active—even if only spiritually active. And that, in fact, is what verse 2 goes on to say.

Ecclesiastes 10:2

“A wise man’s heart is at his right hand; but a fool’s heart at his left.”

This is a verse that needs some explanation—unfortunately, because I cannot do it directly from Scripture, since it is not explained there. “Right” generally stands for activity, and “left” for passivity. For most people the right side is the active side: if you must do something, you do it with your right hand. Hence the expression, “to leave things lying on the left”—that is, to leave them undone. Right is active; left is passive. In politics as well, actually.

They once tried to convince me that “right-wing” political parties in the British parliament sit on the right-hand side of the chamber, and that is why they are called “right”; and that the “left-wing” parties sit on the left-hand side, and that is why they are called “left”. That may be true in London, but is it so all over the world? Elsewhere they also speak of “right” and “left”, but for quite different reasons. I learned those concepts from the Bible. What is called “right” in politics is, in principle, active: it places responsibility for life on the individual person, who must get his own affairs in order. He must work for his living. He must do it himself. The left side—the passive side—says: here I am; I belong to the community, and the community must take care of me. I am putting it rather extremely—black and white—but left and right are, in practice, black and white. The left side is “left” in the sense of “awkward” or “wrong”—that is what the word suggests. Just as “right” comes from “right” and therefore is the “good” side.

What is being said here is that the wise man will be active. The “heart of the wise man”—that is, the disposition of the wise man—is directed towards his right side. That is to say: towards activity, occupation, undertaking something. That is wise, because it keeps a man engaged, and therefore keeps him truly living.

The fool, by contrast, turns to the left: he looks for ease in life, and aims to do as little as possible while benefiting as much as possible from others. But then he also has the least control over his own life, and therefore it is not prudent. If you want to be something, or become something, or have something, you must do something. There is no other way. People are expected to use their understanding and take responsibility upon

themselves. Becoming active and living in that way is the intention—and to find joy in it, and to taste the rest that comes with it. That is also what the next verse says, though it is expressed rather awkwardly.

Ecclesiastes 10:3
"Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to every one that he is a fool."
Even if someone is "walking along the road", he is already called a fool. "His wisdom faileth him" means that he loses heart—he loses courage. He cannot face it any longer. He gives up. He was engaged in something, and at a certain moment he says: that is far enough—let it go. In that way he announces that he is a fool. And of course he is, because a man must go on. If you begin something, you should, in the first place, aim to finish it. If it turns out to be wrong, then turn back as quickly as possible. But if you sit down at the side of the road, it is considered folly.
So it is with our whole life. We should remain active; we should keep stretching forwards.
Philippians 3:14
"I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."
Simply to continue—that is the whole idea. That is how we should see our lives: not as a temporary project, not as building a career or status in this world. We should go through life as children of God and seek His face. We should not avoid circumstances, but rather use our understanding—our wisdom—to meet those circumstances. That will make us spiritually healthy people. We should stretch ourselves towards "that which is before", at any rate. Ecclesiastes 10:3 says that a man should not collapse into inactivity. He should remain active in some manner.
One of the great mistakes man makes is that in everything he does he tends to ask whether it is "worth it", whether it leads anywhere. The Preacher says: nothing is "worth it" in that sense; everything is vanity. So you may as well drop that question. The question is not whether we accomplish something in the world, but whether we become wise—whether our inward man is changed (renewed).
2 Corinthians 4:16
"For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day."
Everything we take in—hear, see, think, and do (roughly in that order)—ought to have an effect on who we are: actively in our soul (our walk of life), and also in our spirit. That is the only true "profit" our activities have. Outwardly, that profit cannot be measured. That is not a problem, because nobody finally judges the outward appearance. The outward is only temporary and disappears by itself. It is the Lord who looks upon the heart. We are judged according to the inward man.
A beautiful statement about that—applied to the regenerate man—is found in this passage (though note: it is 2 Corinthians 3:18, even if the English text labels it otherwise):

> **2 Corinthians 3:18**
> "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the

> Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

Where we learn to know the glory of the Lord—where we "see" it, and, as it were, reflect it—there we are "changed into the same image". By way of clarification: it says "beholding as in a glass", but the thought is not merely "looking into a mirror"; the thought is that it mirrors, it reflects, it carries through. Where, "with open face", the glory of the Lord is thus reflected, we are "changed into the same image from glory to glory". The idea is simply that we receive the glory of the Lord and also pass it on—work it out—give it form. In short: where it works out in our practical life, where the Word of God, the life of Christ, comes to us and through us also takes shape, there we function as a mirror. In reality, the mirror itself changes.

If these things truly become our own, and we live from them, then we indeed see the world as the Lord sees it—and that is the intention. In the first instance this applied to the Corinthians, who were being addressed because they were unwilling to live from what they had received. They had received the Spirit and were regenerate, yet in daily practice they lived "after the flesh", according to the old man.

But the general thought of 2 Corinthians 3:18 applies just as well to life in this old world, even in Old Testament times, when believers were not regenerate in the New Testament sense. The whole point is that what we receive should be taken up into us, so that it becomes our own. If it does not, it remains merely "knowledge stored in a drawer". We can still pass it on, but it does not affect us—and then it is not right. I think that is one of the great problems modern Western man faces in practice: he learns a great deal, but he cannot do anything with it in life. It does not become his own. One ought to know what is valuable in life and in the world, and what is not—what remains and what passes away. That is what the Preacher keeps placing before us, and also that one must keep going.

It is not a matter of waiting until it passes. No: it is a matter of being active, because activity makes a man live. Of course, that activity is itself a relative concept, because we are in Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiastes says: there is a time for this and a time for that, and sometimes it is better to adopt a passive attitude for a moment. That is what the next verse says.

Ecclesiastes 10:4

"If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offences."

In short: if the king becomes angry with you, do not leave your place. Then it is better to be quiet for a moment—calm, passive—because that is ultimately the expression of submission. To my mind, that is the great "medicine" spoken of here. "Yielding pacifieth great offences"—and just as in Ecclesiastes 9:18 we should read "offences" in the sense of missteps, blunders, things handled wrongly. It is not so much about unjust deeds, crimes, or transgressions, but about things that have simply been mishandled. It is still those "missteps" that are in view in these verses. The same theme continues in the following verses, though it may not be obvious at once.

Ecclesiastes 10:5–6
“There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as an error which proceedeth from the ruler:
Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place.”
We have encountered the word “the rich” more than once in this book, in the sense of being rich in wisdom—not rich in a material sense this time, but rich in wisdom.
The positions people occupy are determined from above—by the one who is called here “the ruler”. The Preacher says that this ruler gets it wrong. He regards it as an error on the ruler’s part (the king, for example): he has placed fools in a high position—therefore a position of responsibility—and has seated wise men in a low position. But the responsibility, or the art, of the highest authority is to appoint the right people to the right places. That does not always happen, and there can be many reasons for it—favouritism, for instance. Solomon, the Preacher, calls it “an error” and simply observes that this is how the world is. It should not be so, but sometimes it is no different. When we observe it, we too should simply acknowledge it as a fact.
Then, in a kind of figurative illustration, verse 7 follows.

Ecclesiastes 10:7
“I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.”
Servants ought not to be seated on horses, or riding them. A horse stands for glory, majesty, power, and dominion. “The horse of his majesty” in Zechariah 10:3 refers to the Lord Jesus. A chapter earlier it is said, “thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass” (that is the familiar prophecy in Zechariah). That is not how it “should” be in the ideal sense: the king should be on a horse, and in the future He will appear on the horse of His majesty—He is the Rider on the white horse in Revelation 19:11 (not the rider of Revelation 6, by the way). The Preacher also saw “princes walking as servants upon the earth”. They had to go on foot and did not even have an ass. Things are not fairly distributed in this world. That is true of everything; you may try to fight it, but it achieves little. That is the nature of this world, which lies in the power of the evil one. We know the ideal and we know how it ought to be, but we see that it is not so.
The strange thing is that man—especially religious man—then begins to chase that ideal. He says: it ought to be different, and therefore we must work to make it different. The Preacher says: do not do that. It has no use. It leads to nothing, and it will always remain so here under the sun—at least until the coming of the Messiah. We should accept things as they are and learn to live with them. That requires wisdom. What we need is not a world that must be changed by us, but wisdom. From Scripture we learn that, insofar as the world must be changed, God will do it.

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Ecclesiastes 10:8
“He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.”

Where it says “a pit”, the thought is really “a well”. In the Bible, wells are springs, and a picture of the promises of God. A well—a spring—promises water, and water is a picture of eternal life (possibly of the Word of God, but that Word brings forth eternal life). Man needs water in order to live. But the remarkable thing is this: if a man wants water, and it is not there, he must dig—down into the ground, because there is always water there. It only depends on how deep it is and whether it can be reached. When a man digs, he goes, as it were, down into death. What beautiful symbolism. Where does life come from? Out of death. It is resurrection.

That is why the Bible has stories about wells that the adversary fills up again—read, for example, the history of Isaac. Jacob, by himself, removed the stone from the well (Genesis 29). That too is a splendid story because of its symbolism. Jacob is a figure of the church as such: fleeing from Esau (the Jewish people) into a Gentile land, to uncle Laban (a type of the ten tribes). On that journey the stone is removed from the well—or, if you like, the stone is rolled away from the tomb. It is the same thing: the resurrection of Christ, the breaking in of the New Covenant.

Man, in any case, needs wells. He must have water. If someone wants to settle somewhere, he should first see whether there is water: preferably by a brook, a stream, or a river; otherwise he must drill or dig for water. If there is no water at all, he should not settle there. That is the point.

“He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it” speaks of seeking life—seeking the best—and yet what happens? A man brings destruction on himself. Instead of finding life, he finds death. It connects with that warning earlier in Ecclesiastes: “Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?” (Ecclesiastes 7:16). You may try to reach ideals in this life, in this world, but at the very least you will become their slave, and you will suffer for it. You dig a well and you fall into it. Or you “break an hedge, and a serpent shall bite him”: the moment you finally get through an obstructing barrier, there is new misery behind it. It does not truly advance you. You get through the hedge, and on the other side you are bitten by a serpent.

That is how life works. When one storm has passed, another one comes. If you know that and have accepted it, it is less grievous. If you are wise, you have learned—or you are learning—how to deal with it.

Ecclesiastes 10:9

“Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.”

Removing stones is a familiar image in Eastern lands. The soil there is sand and stones; if one wants to cultivate land, one must first remove the stones—at least those lying on the surface. But where do you put them? You build little walls with them, to mark out the land, to enclose it.

A “wall” is, in Hebrew, kadar—our English word kader (“framework”) comes to mind immediately: a framework is a boundary, a limitation, and whoever breaks through it gets troubled.

So: “Whoso removeth stones”—with the best intentions, to make the land usable for cultivation—“shall be hurt therewith.” It is generally a painful business to carry stones away. Most people do not keep it up very long.

“He that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.” Splitting wood is necessary for building houses, among other things. It is dangerous work. If one tries to introduce change into what exists, it will prove to be a life-threatening business. Better not to do it—such is the sober observation.

Ecclesiastes 10:10
“If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength: but wisdom is profitable to direct.”
The point is that you should not continue too long working with a blunt axe. It costs extra energy and strength, and it is unnecessary. Keep the tool sharp. Have insight into the work you are doing, so that you do it as effectively as possible—and do it at the right time, in the right circumstances. That requires wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 10:11
“Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a babbler is no better.”
This has to do with the charming or controlling of snakes.

> Psalm 58:3–5
> “The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.
> Their poison is like the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear;
> Which will not hearken to the voice of charmers, charming never so wisely.”

“Poison” is venom; snake venom is “fiery poison”. A “charmer” is one who, in some manner, speaks to the serpent in such a way that it is restrained—brought under control. How it works I do not know, but it does work. The serpent ought not to be deaf. The wicked are compared to a “deaf adder”: it cannot be charmed; you can do nothing with it. And so it is with the wicked: by biblical standards they are those who will not listen.
Believers, by contrast, are those who incline their ear to the Lord, because by hearing they would receive life. (Isaiah 55 is referenced for that thought.) Man in general ought to listen; he ought to allow himself to be “read to”—taught, admonished, instructed.
The point is that our eloquence—knowing what to say—should be used in time, beforehand. Once it has already happened—once it has gone wrong—then our words and our wisdom have no use. Therefore part of wisdom is knowing how to use it in time.

Ecclesiastes 10:12
“The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself.”
Earlier we read that a man “eats himself up” if he is not active—if he does not work. That concerned bodily activity. Here it concerns speech. If someone speaks folly—if he has no wisdom, yet still speaks—then he likewise swallows himself up. It is at his own expense; it costs the man himself.

That is why one needs the wisdom of which this whole book speaks: to be wise and not foolish. The intention is that a man should apply that wisdom actively—and that means, at times, speaking; for speaking is the most obvious way to apply wisdom. We do it with the mouth. Throughout the Bible, it is the most important practical “member” of man. First it is what a man says, only then what he does, and only then where he does it.
“The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious” to others. The words of a fool are the opposite—especially for himself. In the end, it costs him his own life.

Ecclesiastes 10:13–14
“The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischievous madness.
A fool also is full of words: and what it surmounts to is mischievous madness”. I find that a fine expression. The fool does not listen, and therefore does not think either. What he does is speak without restraint. He is wasting his words, and it leads to nothing. The beginning of it is already foolishness, and it only gets worse, because a man cannot tell what shall be, nor what shall be after him. We do not know the future, and there is nobody who can tell it us.
The point is that we may indeed speak, and air our opinions and the outcomes of our reasoning, but whether it is worth anything will have to be shown by what comes after. As believers we know what the future will bring us, and what goal we are travelling towards; but purely “under the sun”—and Ecclesiastes largely confines itself to that—we do not know what shall be after us. That expression has been repeated many times in the preceding chapters, and it means there is not so much “wisdom” available in that realm.
Insofar as wisdom is available, it is for the life of today. There is no room at all for those grand philosophies and sweeping speculations—and it is not wise to occupy oneself with them.

Ecclesiastes 10:15
“The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.”
Here it is about the fool’s labour. When the fool goes to work, he only grows tired. He produces nothing—nothing that truly counts, at any rate. Why? “Because he knoweth not how to go to the city.”
Apparently the expression means: he does not know how to get to the goal. It is a great expression.
“To go to the city”, in the Biblical sense, is really to be on the way to the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem. That is the goal: a New Creation, a New Covenant, the Kingdom of Christ. Human life ought to be directed towards that, and that is why I find it such a beautiful phrase.
That it has the sense of travelling towards a goal is clear from the parallel between verse 14 and verse 15: it is really the same thought. In verse 14 it is “many words”, but the point is: a man cannot tell the future. In verse 15 it is “labour”, much work, but the point is: he does not know the

destination. He does not know where he is going—whereas, within certain limits, he certainly ought to know.
Then a man is wise, and he does not need the many words. We have the saying: “Truth does not need many words; a lie, on the other hand, never has enough.” Truth is relatively simple, but many words usually point to folly—because one does not really know what one is talking about. If you know what the intention is, you can give your work better substance. That is what one needs wisdom for. But the fool does not have it.

Ecclesiastes 10:16–17
“Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning!
Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!”
“To eat in the morning” is about holding banquets—about revelry, in other words. Verse 16 stands over against verse 17, so you can see the parallel: these verses still have to do with activity. Things really do have to be done.
“Not for drunkenness” is not merely a casual phrase. The thought is that a man should indeed be active, and he should eat and drink and even be glad—as we have learned many times—yet he should know the limits. He should be conscious of the responsibilities he has. And this applies especially to those who bear responsibility—thus, to the king, who is called at once “the son of nobles”. A man is “noble” because he knows his responsibilities: for his own life, and also towards others.

Ecclesiastes 10:18
“By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.”
“By much slothfulness” corresponds to the “left” side (inactivity) from verse 2. It is not only about a house; it applies to everything—to life itself. “The building” is the beams: the framework, the skeleton, the timbers that hold the house together. The idea here is that the “house”, which stands there, must be maintained, otherwise it collapses of itself. The house is a model for life as a whole. With a roof this is obvious—otherwise “the house droppeth through”. But so it is in life: things must be kept in order; you cannot assume that what exists will always remain. One must do something about it.
That is, in fact, what our life is about. We fight a battle against corruption—a battle against death, really—and we lose it. Therefore we should not spend too much of our life on nothing but that struggle against decay. To find the right balance in that, you need wisdom.
Earlier it was said that if a man does not move his hands and does nothing, he consumes himself. It comes to the same thing. One should do something to keep life and circumstances in good repair. And that is also the drift of the next verse, though many do not notice it.

Ecclesiastes 10:19

“A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things.”
Where it says “a feast”, the Hebrew term is the word for “bread” (lechem). “Bread” is used as a designation for the whole meal. We know that, for instance, from “bread and cup” as a way of speaking about the Lord’s supper—rather a grand expression for a piece of bread and a sip of wine.
A feast is made for laughter. That stands, black on white, in the Bible. Wine makes life glad, and meals are the high points of the day. A meal in Scripture is not only a picture of life; it also gives life—one needs food to live. At the same time, the meal expresses fellowship: it is shared. Very often the word “feast” in the Bible really means a festival. A festival without a meal—without anything to eat or drink—is no festival at all.
And it adds: “but money answereth all things.” That is: money carries everything. To eat and drink—to have a meal—one needs money, and a celebration costs money as well. If we want those things, it has to be possible: it has to be paid for. If we do not work, if we do not “earn our bread”, then we have no bread—no food at all.
But there is more behind it. Those meals—bread and wine—are ideas we also know in a New Testament context. They are pictures of the New Covenant and of our union with Christ: bread and wine as an expression of the fellowship in which we live with Him. In that sense too it can be said: money carries everything; for what is translated “money” is in fact “silver”, and in Scripture silver stands for the ransom price paid for us. Figuratively, our position—seated with Christ at the table—is founded upon, and carried by, the price of redemption paid by God.
What is being said here is that one must not be lazy. One really should do something—be occupied—and the Preacher has explicitly brought that forward in the preceding chapters. He even said, in 9:10: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” In that way a man comes by his food—by bread and wine and these meals. A man should live; he should do something; and the result is gladness, which is expressed in eating and drinking. And conversely, eating and drinking are necessary in order to do anything at all—so it is a splendid interplay.

Ecclesiastes 10:20
“Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.”
This is the thought of “walls have ears” and “a little bird will fly off and tell it”. So one should restrain oneself, and indeed know one’s place. “A bird of the air” and “that which hath wings” are the same thing twice over, just as “shall carry the voice” and “shall tell the matter” are two ways of saying the same thing.
The point is that one should govern one’s speech, and that it is unwise to say things against those who are set over us. This is not the first time it has been said. We are earthly and should be humble. We should—also as believers—know our place and be subject to human authority.
A man may be tempted to curse the king because he disagrees with his policy; he may curse the rich, in the sense of the powerful, because he

disagrees with them too. But it is questionable where the right really lies. In this world “under the sun” it is not truth that rules, but power—and in practice one must take that into account.
In the world under the sun there is no truth: everything is relative, depending on how one sees and experiences things. But the search for truth has directly to do with the things that are above the sun. Even if we suffer wrong in the world, nothing prevents us from seeking truth—but that belongs to what is above the sun, and that is what matters.
The apostle Paul later writes the same kind of thing to the Corinthians:

> 1 Corinthians 6:7
> “Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?”

What does it matter? If justice must be done, it will be done at some point. That has been brought forward multiple times in Ecclesiastes: God will bring things to account. From us it may be expected that, in all humility, we follow the counsel given us here in Scripture by this wise Preacher—and that we enjoy our life as much as possible.

Ecclesiastes 11:1–2
“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.
Here it says that we might even do things against our own “common sense”. It is explained that we should not do things only while “looking at results”. In the Bible—certainly in the New Testament—labour is directed towards result: one would receive reward from it. But here it says: “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” And again: “Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.” One should do things “for nothing”, as it were.
The thought behind “cast thy bread upon the waters” is that the word “bread” (a figure of speech) is used for “seed”, from which bread comes. It says “bread”, but seed is meant. That might have become your bread, but you cast it away upon the water. “Waters” can stand for the multitude of this world: the intangible mass in which one can easily be swallowed up—drown, that is, die. Yet there is a promise attached: of what is cast out, something returns. A man may do things that seem to be for nothing at all, and yet at some time, in some way, they yield a result—for example because he learns from it himself, or gains experience that he can use later.
The point is that one should do things because one is driven to them—because one wants to. That is really the idea. You still see it among artists, writers of books and poems, and among musicians: they do it simply because they must. Perhaps without any visible effect; yet it does have an effect upon the person himself, and that is what matters. It is a kind of inner “metabolism”: something goes in, and it must come out in some way. That is necessary.

Hence the individual freedom of man is the highest good he possesses: the freedom to do something that “serves no purpose”, that does not fit the economic or social system. It is healthy for a man that what is within him should also come out. In reality that gives a man peace and gladness. So the life of a child of God works on the higher level of spiritual life as well. The Spirit inspires believers to do something; it comes as prompting. Suppose we first weigh everything: whether it is useful, whether it costs too much, whether it yields a return, whether we have time, whether it is “healthy”. If that is our approach, nothing comes of it. We should do things that arise within us.

On the other hand, we should not live by feelings, nor be too impulsive. For that we are taught out of the Word of God—not only with regard to spiritual life, but also with regard to earthly life. In a disciplined life, furnished with all the wisdom we gain from the Word, there should still be room for that inward drive. If the Lord is to live His life in us, if the Spirit is to lead us, it means there are inner motives within us. If we have learned to live as the Preacher sets it out, it is not so difficult to make room for that in our lives. We receive it from the Lord, and where it takes shape in our life—where it comes to expression—it changes our heart, and we are changed.

Therefore I am grateful that I may stand before you this evening. Whether it does something in you? I hope so; but for me it certainly does something. It is receiving and living out. It does not have to be in this form —only let it find expression in our life.

If a man receives that glory—the Word of God—and does not live it out, then it remains inside him. Then he becomes “dropsical”, waterlogged. A Pharisee, living under the law, is called “a man which had the dropsy” in Luke 14:2. He was full of “water”, that is, of “the Word of God”—but if it is only poured in, and has no outworking, it kills you. The intention is that the Word of God goes in and comes out: then one practises what one has heard and learned.

> 2 Corinthians 4:16
> “For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.”

It is about receiving in the heart and living out in practice: there it changes us. That is the result in ourselves—in our inward man, in who we are. It determines who we are in the heart, and that heart will be judged by God.

As for the expression “to seven, and also to eight”, I do not know what it literally means. The general thought is that it is a Hebrew idiom pointing forward into the future. That may come later. I can well imagine that seven and eight have something to do with the future: seven makes me think of the millennial kingdom, and eight of the New Creation. With seven and eight together I therefore think of the Messianic Kingdom—the eternal Kingdom of Christ. There are other views as well. Some say it means one should care for other people—seven or eight perhaps. But the thrust of the verse is clear enough: “Give a portion”—give it away, give gifts, without wanting anything back. Do not put it off, “for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.”

Under verse 2 my Bible refers to:

> 2 Corinthians 9:10
> "Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness;)"

In 2 Corinthians that belongs to two chapters which are, in effect, nothing other than the recommendation of a collection—the gathering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. That too is "the work of the Lord". The thought is that when we give something for the Lord's sake, He will ultimately reward it in some manner. And I see no reason why not already in this life. It is a kind of principle that generally holds, even in this old world under the sun: a man sows, and meets it again. That is also what verse 3 says.

Ecclesiastes 11:3
"If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be."
Water evaporates and rises, but at some point it falls again—sometimes in downpours. Something, even much, comes back. With this the Preacher comes to the thought that a man has no real influence over it: he cannot manage it, cannot steer it, does not have it under control. We must learn that it cannot be controlled—and simply wait to see how it turns out. The tree falls once, sooner or later. Which way? Who can say? You do not know. We must wait.

Ecclesiastes 11:4–5
"He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.
As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all."
The most favourable moment never really comes—so get on with it. If you keep thinking too long about whether you should do something or not, then you might as well not do it at all; nothing will come of it anyway. That will spare us a great deal of worry.
The same applies to the preaching of the Word. If you first wait until you find "good ground" (the parable of the sower in Matthew 13), you will not find it. You are better off scattering it about. If it is good ground, it will spring up; if it is not, it will not. In any case, you cannot control it. You must simply do it, and then not trouble yourself.
"He that regardeth the clouds shall not reap" is reflected in John 3:8:

> "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

The wind—the Spirit—does what He wills. You do not know where He comes from, nor where He is going. You cannot get hold of it, and yet He does His work. God does His work. He has His plan, and He carries it out.

That means we as men should realise who we are: “of the earth, earthy”. The wisest course is to submit ourselves to the Lord and His Word, and so learn how to deal with the irregular circumstances of life as a whole.
A man “knoweth not the works of God who maketh all”. One cannot predict these things. That was already stated in the previous chapter as well: what it is that shall be, and what shall be after him. So it remains always thus.

Ecclesiastes 11:4–10
“He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.”
The most favourable moment never really arrives—so let it go and get on with it. If you spend too long weighing up whether you should do something or not, you may as well not do it at all; nothing will come of it then. That saves us a great deal of worry.
That applies just as much to the preaching of the Word. If you first wait until you find good ground (the parable of the sower in Matthew 13), you will not find it. You are better off scattering the seed around. If it is good ground, it will come up; if it is not good ground, it will not. In any case you cannot control that. You must simply do it, and then stop fretting about it.
We find the same thought echoed in John 3:8:

> “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

The wind—the Spirit—does what He wills. You do not know where He comes from, nor where He is going. You have no grip on it, and yet He does His work. God does His work. He has His plan, and He carries it out.
That means that we, as men, should realise who we are—namely, “of the earth, earthy”. The wisest course is to submit ourselves to the Lord and His Word, so that we learn how to deal with the irregular circumstances of life as a whole.

Ecclesiastes 11:5
“As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.”
One does not know “the works of God who maketh all”. You cannot predict things—and the previous chapter already said the same (10:14): what shall be, and what shall be after him. So it remains always thus.

Ecclesiastes 11:6
“In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.”
“The morning” and “the evening” are, first of all, the morning and evening of our life. So: sow your seed when you are young, but do it still when you have grown old—your whole life long, then. Simply keep going, because you do not know whether both together will be good. You do not know what will come of it.

And in the end, that does not matter most. What matters is how the Lord thinks of it and how He deals with it. We must leave it with Him. We do not know what is good—“whether shall prosper, either this or that”, or perhaps both. The final outcome of everything, including our lives, will only be seen in the future.

Ecclesiastes 11:7
“Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:”
Light stands not only for joy, but also for wisdom. Joy exists only where wisdom is. One needs light in order to be glad. Light and sun speak of truth, wisdom, and the joy that flows from it.
That also makes room for perspective: if you know the truth, you also know the relativity of our position in a world in which that truth is, in itself, not found “under the sun”. But we know the truth through the Lord Jesus Christ and through the Word of God—and therefore we also know humour. Look among the nations: the most humour is found where men know the Lord best. In “Christian-orthodox” circles, where the truth is not really known (though they call themselves Christian), there is no room for humour; one does not expect it there. But where the grace of God is known, there is reason for joy—and room to laugh.

Ecclesiastes 11:8
“But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.”
If a man lives many years and rejoices in all the good of those years, it still adds: “yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many.” It will prove that all that came was only temporary and has passed away. Everything passes, and so do we.
That is perspective—and therefore humour as well. Whatever passes, in itself it is empty. The fulness of things will be revealed to us in the future. For now we must be content with little—less than we can imagine. That is our problem: we can picture everything to ourselves; we can imagine a life completely filled with this and that. But we do not have such a life, and it does not exist.
Yet where we set our expectation on the Lord—on His promises, His Word, the life He gives—we do not struggle with this empty life here. He is the One who fills it; and even if today it does not feel full, one day it will be full. Realising that our existence “under the sun”, as such, is empty in itself, brings positive thoughts with it: namely, that we ought to be filled with things that come from above the sun—with the Word of God. Man is a hollow vessel. We must be filled with what the Lord gives us, otherwise we have an empty existence here under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 11:9
“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of

thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."

One should not worry so much, but "make merry"—especially when one is young. And the young man should learn to "walk in the ways of thine heart". By the time one is grown, one must be able to walk one's own paths—and that must be learned.

A key mark of being a child is that a child is receptive, and therefore geared to learning. It ought to be so for older people as well. If you want to grow old in a reasonably healthy way, the most important thing you ought to do is to keep studying—keep learning, keep investigating; in any case, keep learning. If you learn nothing anymore, you are old; and if you no longer want to learn, you are, in truth, already ancient.

Man is meant to be a hollow earthen vessel that must be filled. God formed Adam—man—out of the dust of the ground, and then breathed into him something translated as "breath". I would translate it as "spirit", though that is not quite correct either. God breathed into him that breath, the neshama—the principle, the basis, of life. And thus that "vessel of breath" became alive:

> "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7)

The normal Hebrew word for "spirit" is ruach, and that stands for man's thinking and knowing—for his spiritual, intellectual activity—for his studying, thinking, and gathering of information. The active man, who moves and does things in practical life, is called "the soul". (See also the study "Spirit, soul and body".)

The spirit of man is his thinking; it is the gathered information he has; it is his memory. A baby does not think and knows nothing—this is formed later. The shaping of that spirit is largely determined by the "nature of the vessel", and then by the practice of his life. It is shaped by his body and all that is in it. It is shaped by his soul—that is, by how life develops, what the circumstances are. Out of that, spirit arises.

At the end of the course the body disappears:

> "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Genesis 3:19)

With it, the soul also (for man is no longer active in this life here). What remains is spirit—and that

> "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." (Ecclesiastes 12:7)

So it returns to where it came from, and by which it came into being. The result of our life is that spirit. It may go to a realm of the dead, or to heaven. So after the "principle of life" which God breathed into the "hollow vessel" at the beginning, there is the formation of that spirit—and man himself bears responsibility for that. As for the spirit of a child, the parents bear responsibility in large measure—at least for the first part, and that is undoubtedly the most important part, according to Scripture. Where there is a lack of spirit—thus a lack of knowledge and thinking ability, a lack of experience (which is also knowledge)—the child stands

under parents and carers. The issue is the “parent-principle” as such. And it does not apply only to the child, because Ecclesiastes here speaks of “the young man in his youth”: it is said to those who are no longer children, but not yet old. In the Bible I have come to the conclusion that a “young man” can be about forty years old; there are many passages from which that follows. “Youth” is the first half of life. The idea is that man’s life is divided into two parts: it begins small, grows up, becomes bigger, develops—and then it passes its peak and goes downhill.

When a man is in the strength of his life—say, about forty or so—he should make merry; he should be enterprising; he should do what he would like to do. Later it may well no longer be possible. There comes a time, if one is granted time to live, when it truly does not work anymore. Then it stops; and that is why these things are said. The sooner you have learned things, the sooner you have gained experience, the longer you will enjoy it.

So: when you are young, you should be active. There are things I have done in my life that I probably cannot do anymore, and for which I no longer really have the nerve—yet I am delighted that I did them, and did them in time. There are other things I would have liked to do and regret not doing, because now it truly is too late. Emigrating, for example: I should have done that. I thought about it earlier. Then I did not dare; I shrank back from it. Perhaps I could not have done it; but afterwards I have sometimes thought: what a pity.

If a man wants something, he should do it when he is young—especially if he wants to gain experience while young. And if things go wrong then, no matter: one can still return; one still has options; one can still change course and take another road. That is all still simple. If you are twenty or thirty and you are made redundant and cannot find work, you can still learn another trade. But if you are fifty, it becomes a very different story: you simply no longer get the chance, and most likely you cannot do it anymore either. You are already so formed, so fixed (even in your thinking, in certain patterns of living) that such a switch is no longer possible.

Verse 9 ends: “but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.” The principle—the most basic thing—is that if there is a God, one ought to serve Him; and if one does not serve Him, then one will be judged by God. That fact is known across the whole world, in all religion. The only reason a man does not want to believe there is a God is because he does not want to face the reality that he will one day have to give account before that God. And so he persuades himself there is no God—then he does not have to answer afterwards. That is “ostrich politics”: sticking one’s head in the sand.

Therefore man should live as it says here, and in doing so know God—and know that God is

> “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

and also this:

> “Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” (Hebrews 4:13)

Ecclesiastes 11:10

“Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.”

What is translated here as “sorrow” is really the word for “care”, for worry. When one is young, one should not be anxious. There is little to be anxious about, because generally one has sufficient reserve, strength, and time to correct missteps. “Care” always has to do with fear of the future: today works out, but tomorrow and the day after… That is fear of what is coming.

When one is young, one may indeed have much future, but also still plenty of time to give that future substance. There is time left—therefore: remove that care from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh. My conclusion is that “the evil” here is that very care: one should not worry about the future in general.

The New Testament says the same, for example:

> “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” (1 Peter 5:7)

We worry because we have understanding: we can think about “tomorrow”, form an image of it, and then get ourselves into trouble with it. We bring that to the Lord, because ultimately our future is in His hand.

Then it says: “for childhood and youth are vanity.” There is nothing wrong with that—no more than there is anything wrong with this book opening with “all is vanity.” So it is. Do not worry too much. Has not the Preacher explained through the previous chapters that you do not have it in your hand anyway? And besides: what sensible or serious thing can a man really accomplish in his life? The answer is: nothing, for there is nothing truly “substantial” in it under the sun; it is vanity.

The only thing that counts is that we fill our hearts with the Word of God, then live out of the heart, and find our joy and peace there—and for that we shall be rewarded by the Lord after this life. That is the whole story. There is no more to this life than that. It is, as it seems to me, the end of all philosophy. So: one should gain life-experience; one should learn; one should acquire wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 12:1

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;”

That one should remember the Creator had, in effect, already been said in verse 9 of the previous chapter—so what is brought forward here is, in a sense, a repetition. What is added is that this remembering of the Creator should be done “while the evil days come not”—that is, in your youth; as a young man; before the years draw near in which you say: I have no desire in them, no “pleasure” in them.

“Pleasure” here first of all means zest for life: dynamism, enterprise, drive. When one is young, one still learns; then one still remembers: back then

this, back then that—those things made an impression. The first time I went to South Africa, in 1983, I still remember very clearly. The other times I do not remember so precisely. The older one gets, the fewer new impressions one gains, and the less one adds to one's learning—that is inevitable.

Do not misunderstand me: you must not conclude from this that you should no longer remember the Creator when you are old. But it does mean, above all, that you must do it early. It has an effect on your life then; it can give it content; and it makes you into who you ought to be—or into what you will one day be. For after a certain age nothing really changes anymore: then you only get older.

I find it such a splendid passage, with a touch of grim amusement. It is an ironic—perhaps even cynical—passage. The writer exerts himself, in a lyrical way and through metaphors, to describe the process of ageing and even of dying. Why look for the positive? It goes only downhill. The Preacher describes it in detail. If you realise that, you can then laugh about it—or sing about it, as Stuart Hamblen does in "This Old House". Carl Stuart Hamblen drew that song, in essence, from Ecclesiastes 12. It is about a house that is falling apart: in the end you can say, it is a poor house—you fall through the floors, the windows will not shut, and all the rest. But then: I do not live there anymore—"I don't live here anymore." A splendid lyric.

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Only old people can really sing that—usually men—who then sing about their own decline in a comic way. But what does it matter? One goes to the Lord. One is a child of God; one is filled with the Word of God, and thereby with the Life of God—the life of Christ. What can still happen? Yes, things worsen: one gradually needs a stick or crutches; one has scars everywhere from the operations one has undergone; one wears a wig because one is bald. If you take yourself seriously, you no longer take the Lord seriously enough. And the other way round: if you take the Lord seriously, you no longer take yourself seriously—and that is how it ought to be.

One should realise that life is temporary—not only in the sense that it can be over from one day to the next, but simply: it is only temporary. One will reckon with that. If you are conscious of it, you no longer take yourself so seriously.

God has promised us that it ends here: that we shall be delivered from this earthly body. The normal decline of man is that he grows old and loses his strength; he cannot do many things anymore. We find that grievous—but the beautiful thing is that we have the promise that our citizenship is in heaven, and on that ground we look for the Saviour, who shall change our vile body and make it like unto His glorious body:

> "For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ:
> Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself." (Philippians 3:20–21)

Ultimately it is a blessing. Stated starkly, death is a blessing, because it brings the existence of the life of a sinner to an end. For:

> "For he that is dead is freed from sin." (Romans 6:7)

And the glad tidings that comes over it is:

> "For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead:" (2 Corinthians 5:14)

What do we still complain about after that?
The Preacher goes on to describe human decline in the following verses, with a magnificent list full of metaphors.

Ecclesiastes 12:2
"While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:"
After rain, the sunshine is supposed to come again. But not here. After the rain, the clouds return—the thing simply goes on. It does not grow light again.
The sun and the light stand for life in general, but light also stands for joy. The light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to behold the sun. It has to do with gladness in life. If you have no joy (light), it is dark. But light is also wisdom. If a man is wise, he is enlightened: in the light he learns to see things. Which only confirms what we have already seen in the previous chapters: it is, in truth, impossible to be genuinely glad without knowledge. One should become wise, be taught, and draw one's joy from that.
Where do old people get their joy and their laughter from? They know where they are going, and that the road there is not as long as it used to be. They say with joy: "I'm going home"; "I am going home." If you are not "going home", there is nothing to be glad about. Then you grow old and grumpy. What do I still have to expect? What should I still rejoice in?
The sun, the light, the moon and the stars go out one day. And besides—as said—when a man is truly old, he no longer learns; and the older one gets, the less one learns. So the light gradually goes out, and with it the joy disappears. Therefore one should seek that joy—which is found in the Word of the Lord—in good time. Before "the clouds return after the rain", one should seek the Creator. Before that, one should allow oneself to be taught by Him, for the weather grows steadily worse, and the light slowly goes out.

Ecclesiastes 12:3–4
"In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,"
"The keepers of the house" appears to mean the arms and hands—also because it says, "and the strong men shall bow themselves", which evidently refers to the legs. You see, for example, old men with crooked legs: in the end they buckle. Old hands tremble with age. Muscle strength is no longer properly under control. One must be able to laugh at it a little, but it does mean a man's capabilities are restricted. He can no longer do

everything “just like that”. He must do things attentively and carefully, and it did not need to be that way before.
Therefore: while you still have “good legs”, you should climb mountains—if that is something you would have wanted to do—for the time comes when you cannot.
“The grinders” are the teeth with which we must process our food. One can no longer chew properly, and therefore cannot digest properly. That means that what one takes in is no longer processed well. And I am not speaking now only of literal food: one hears things, sees things, but it no longer penetrates properly. Too little remains. One is no longer receptive.
So the story goes on, for “those that look out of the windows” are, of course, the eyes—looking out from the eye-sockets through the eyelids, the “windows”. They are darkened. Logically, then, “the doors” in verse 4 must be the ears. Both sight and hearing decline.
But all three—teeth, eyes, and ears—point to the same thing: a man is no longer receptive. That does not necessarily mean he hears or sees nothing; it simply does not get through. Hence the need to become as a child. With children all the senses are fully active; one should make use of that, because then one is receptive.

Ecclesiastes 12:4
“And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;”
“The doors … shut in the streets” means that one no longer properly hears what is going on. “Grinding” has to do with grinding grain—preparing the meal. And so it links together: meal, grinding. In the symbolism, preparing a meal is the expression of a man’s whole active life, as we discussed earlier in connection with “bread and cup”. That is man’s life.
When there is only “the sound of the grinding … low”, one is no longer properly aware of what is happening. That is often so. Much passes such people by. Things that are world-shattering are, for older people, often not world-shattering at all—partly from experience, in the sense of: it will pass, and for me personally it makes little difference anyway. You can explain it positively or negatively, but it is the phenomenon as such.
All sorts of things close up, and the light goes out. The teeth are no longer there. It happens literally, but it is also symbolic of what really happens to man: life winds down. What is being said here is that life is no longer so active. One is not so full of zest for life anymore, and therefore it said in verse 1: “I have no pleasure in them.”
“And he shall rise up at the voice of the bird”—have you ever risen up at the voice of a little bird? It simply means that one wakes at the slightest thing. Sleep becomes much lighter as one grows older, and therefore also much shorter. If you “rise up at the voice of the bird”, you have broken sleep; and for many older people that is indeed a problem.
Then it says: “and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low.” There are only two of them, of course. It says literally: “the daughters of music”. These are the vocal cords: the elasticity goes out of them, and so they

begin to sag—they are “brought low”. That is why the human voice gradually becomes lower. The voice slowly sinks away and is also damaged over the years. We are less conscious of that, but it is truly so. It happens like that with all tissue in the human body. Tissue comes in that should not really be there: a kind of scar tissue with no elasticity, and therefore our cheeks sag, our chin, and more besides. The springiness—the stretch—goes out. If a doctor wants to know, in broad terms, how long you have left, he can do a simple test: he looks at how far your skin can still be stretched. If the elasticity is gone entirely, then it is nearly over, because that resilience must be there; the skin must be springy.
That is literally true in the body, but figuratively it is true as well. One must be resilient in thought, in heart, in spirit—whatever you call it. One must be able to absorb something; to take blows—and then recover.

Ecclesiastes 12:5
“Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:”
There are two views about “they shall be afraid of that which is high”. One is: they develop a fear of heights. It may also have to do with unevenness in the terrain, in the road, because walking uphill is a heavy business. I think it refers to that, because an ailment of old age is that one can no longer overcome that change in height. In the Netherlands we have few problems with that, of course, but we do have staircases—and that is a problem indeed: steeply upwards.
On the way of the ageing man there will be “fears”. One of them is precisely that height difference. Taken together, it also means that everything becomes dangerous and that one sees danger everywhere. What used to be no obstacles suddenly become obstacles, and that makes life heavier.
“And the almond tree shall flourish.” If you have seen a blossoming—white—almond tree, especially the crown, you know what it means: the hair turns white.
“And the grasshopper shall be a burden” seems to be an idiomatic expression. Its meaning corresponds to: making a mountain out of a molehill. Making something big out of something small: little problems become big problems, and that makes “desire shall fail”. Zest for life and enterprise is lacking—and that can be explained, because every undertaking becomes a heavy task.
So the circle closes, for that is how it began in verse 1. Now comes the end: “because man goeth to his long home”. Man is on his way to his long home, “and the mourners go about the streets.” They are waiting for his death. The mourners are, as it were, standing outside the door. The undertaker knows his customers.
And then there follows yet another sequence of such expressions.

Ecclesiastes 12:6–7

“Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.”
This is about the most fundamental organs of the human body. I think of the hymn, Some day the silver cord will break,
And I no more as now shall sing;
But oh, the joy when I shall wake
Within the palace of the King! It is composed by Fanny Crosby: our live will end.
The thought is that this silver cord, this golden bowl, and that pitcher belong together—at least the silver cord and the golden bowl. People imagine that the golden bowl hangs from the silver cord or chain, like a golden lamp—still a bowl, with oil. If the silver cord breaks and the golden bowl falls and shatters, the light goes out.
The silver cord is linked with the nervous system: what connects, binds, and holds together the organs and limbs, jointly directing and maintaining them. The golden bowl is also linked with the brain. The brain and the nervous system are one system—and hence “silver cord” and “golden bowl”.
There is another theory, but it does not come from Scripture: namely, the idea that man consists of a material part and an immaterial part (whether one calls it spirit or soul). The two would be connected by a band, a cord. When a man dies, the spirit—the immaterial part—leaves the body, and so the bond between them is broken.
I do not think the Preacher is speaking of that. I think he is speaking of the working of human organs, not of the invisible part of man. That invisible part is named separately, plainly, in verse 7.
That other idea comes from occult circles, from spiritism, where people claim to “leave” their body. Because people say they have seen it themselves—that they floated above their own body and were connected to it by a cord—some have even tried to support it from the Bible. They then claim to find it here in Ecclesiastes in this “silver cord”. It is very likely that, if you look up the term, you will be offered that explanation—but it certainly does not come from the Bible. Besides, those who say they “left” also “returned” afterwards. Whatever they want to claim, they did not die. They did not see the realm of the dead and did not enter death. Therefore you do not need to believe such stories, and any conclusions drawn from them have no value.
I do not think one can step out of the body in that way. Normally speaking, it cannot be done at all. Where something like that does occur, in my view it is a demon—a spirit—present in that person. It has, on occasion, been out, and it brings back into the body the information, the experience, what it saw.
I will say briefly how it is, roughly. Demons are spirits that take possession of men; so to speak they dwell in their bodies. What that looks like, I do not know, for it does not “look” like anything: they are invisible spirits. One cannot point them out, but it is what the Bible calls possession. With some people you notice it, because those spirits behave very badly in the body of that person (for example in Matthew 4, 8, 12, and 15). With other

people you do not notice it, because they are more restrained spirits, or have learned to adapt.
But that they can be in a person we know because it is written in Scripture. And just as it is written that they can be in, it is also written that they can be out: they are cast out, for example (Matthew 7:22). It seems clear to me that such a demon leaves the body when a man lays that body down. When a body dies, the spirit of that person departs—and a demon departs then as well. A spirit, a demon, takes its memories with it. Hence some people have memories of things they never experienced, even of things from before they lived, and thus belonging to others. From that people arrive at the doctrine of reincarnation.
Reincarnation exists too, but it does not concern human beings. In this connection it is not about descendants of Adam. It concerns demons—disembodied beings from before Adam—who incarnate, that is, enter into someone's flesh, and then reincarnate into another person's flesh. They carry their traits with them; and if those traits are strong, they manifest them in the other person. Then people say: that other person is the reincarnation of the one who died before.
All that has nothing to do with verse 6—so forgive this "step out" of the subject.
What matters here is that the silver cord breaks and the golden bowl shatters. After that follows: "or the pitcher be broken at the fountain": that concerns the heart with the blood vessels—think of the "fountain" as the spring of blood, an artery. "Or the wheel broken at the cistern" can hardly mean anything other than the lungs, and thus breathing.

Ecclesiastes 12:7

"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."
The consequence is verse 7, and that is completely plain language: the dust returns to the earth, as it was; and the spirit returns to God who gave it.
God breathed the neshama into man (Genesis 2:7). That is the basis, the principle, of human life, out of which the spirit (ruach) of man arises. In that sense God gives man the spirit: not the specific qualities, and not even at birth. On the contrary, that spirit develops over the course of human life. It comes into being and is the fruit that comes forth from the man himself.
The "dust of the earth" functions as the mother of what will be born, what will be brought forth. The "neshama of God" functions as the father, as the seed that is placed within. From that man proceeds. What finally remains of man is the spirit—and that stands before God.
Therefore it matters greatly what a man is fed with, because that determines his spirit, his inward man.
When it says, "and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it", you should not read into it that the spirit of man automatically goes to heaven, as some think.
Some, around the expression "the spirit shall return unto God who gave it", say that man therefore goes to heaven, because they use "heaven" as a word for "the hereafter". That is not so.

In general it is so that God promised life to the believing man, and even bodily resurrection—not so that one would then “enter heaven”, but in order to live, after the last day, on a new earth.
Heaven is reserved specifically for the “church of the firstborn”, which according to Hebrews 12:23 is written—or enrolled—in heaven. Those are the first believers after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. They are waiting for His coming again. That applies to you and me. On the ground of faith, on the ground of our new birth, we have received a position in that church.
For us it is not even merely “the hereafter”, because we are already now, while still in the flesh, seated with Christ in heaven, says the Bible (Ephesians 2:6).
It means that that spirit comes under the control of God. He can preserve that spirit or cast it away; that is roughly what this passage comes to. In reality there are only two possibilities: to be saved or to be lost.
The spirit (not “the soul”) returns to God, and He preserves that spirit in the realm of the dead—in hell—or later (after the judgement on the “Last Day”) in “the lake of fire”, if so. That is the losing of the spirit. “And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”
On the other hand—this concerns being saved—that spirit ultimately comes onto the New Earth. To be lost or to be saved therefore depends on what that spirit consists of, how it has been formed: whether the life of God is in it or not; whether His Word has taken shape in it or not.
Before the dust returns to the earth again, one should remember the Creator. With that “dust” man has less difficulty, partly because you can see that man’s dust does indeed return to the earth. People read and hear it too: “ashes to ashes and dust to dust”. But that the spirit returns to God, who gave it, people do not so readily accept. As believers we should not worry about it. We have already risen with Christ. We have already received His life. If this body gives out—if “the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken”—we do not go to the realm of the dead. We only leave this earth here. According to the Bible, we were already in heaven.

Ecclesiastes 12:8
“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.”
All human existence is empty, because it has no goal in itself. It has a temporary function, and then “the pitcher goes to the water” long enough—in the sea of life—“until it breaks”. The Preacher, the “crier”, does not encourage us to join in “the rush of the nations”. In reality he calls us out of it, because that whole world—humanity as a whole—has gone mad: a humanity that thinks we are here for some purpose; that God put man on earth—if one even believes in God—so that he might develop himself, or develop the world, or improve it; or rescue the environment, or even save the whole earth. It is all nonsense. It is an impossibility—and indeed the height of arrogance.
That is why older people in our society are pushed aside as quickly as possible: they gradually discover that it does not work. They have learned that nothing can be improved; that nothing can be “developed”. Man has sought refuge in technology: there, at least, something still seemed

developable. People mistakenly think that if “development” is possible in technology, then it must be so in the whole creation. Long live evolution again. That theory is, by the way, about as old as the industrial revolution —and that is no accident. It arises from man’s philosophy, in which there is no place for God.
Where people let go of God, the effect of leaven arises. It grows larger and larger and larger—but it is also empty. In the end it collapses back again. It implodes. This will happen to the whole creation; in any case to humanity as such. The bigger it becomes, the emptier it is. The Preacher par excellence said: “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.” He calls us out of this world. If anyone is “a Preacher”, it is He. He was “a greater than Solomon”.
In the Bible leaven is a picture of false doctrine. It is always a doctrine that places man on a pedestal. That is what happens in the world where people do not know the Lord. Where people do not know the Truth, they are left with the lie. And that always goes on about bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. When growth slows down, everyone panics. So we must come out of that world.
The apostle Paul said we should “go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.” That is, we should go out to Him. This is not our world. We have a different expectation. We seek the Lord and fill ourselves with Him. What the world thinks of us should not interest us at all. It makes no difference whatsoever.
Now we get the closing section of the Book in verse 9.

Ecclesiastes 12:9
“And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.”
This is what we should do in our lives. We cannot compete with a man like Solomon, let alone with the Lord Himself, but this is how we should go through life: seeking knowledge—observing phenomena, examining them, and then trying to summarise them. That is often the hardest part. Thankfully there are others who help us with that, for instance with short proverbs that simply state how it really is: putting things in their proper proportions, and formulating it in one sentence.
Real literature ought to concern itself with formulating things briefly and clearly. Where it does not, it becomes vanity all over again; it becomes “a multitude of words”. The Preacher was wise and taught the people still more knowledge. He compiled many proverbs. The art is to say the things with as few words as possible—yet the right words—to construct them; and that makes it a craft.

> 1 Kings 4:29–34
> “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore.
> And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt.
> For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman,

and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about.
And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five.
And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes.
And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom."

God Himself gave Solomon such enormous wisdom that he was wiser than all men. That resulted in very many proverbs, and also songs.
What is the difference between a "spiritual" and a "gospel"? A spiritual contains text that is not meant literally; it is about the figurative meaning. One example: Joshua fit the battle of Jericho. What do we care whether Joshua did that? What matters is something else entirely: that one man, with his people, in the power of the Lord, gained the victory—that is the thrust of the text, the figurative meaning. Roll Jordan roll—"let the Jordan roll"—is about the river Jordan as a picture of death.
Good songs—first and foremost in their words—also contain wisdom. Writing songs is also constructing: with few words, yet saying exactly what you mean, and in such a way that it speaks to you and sticks with you. From ancient times believers have been able to quote hymns because they made an impression. This too is a craft, arising, of course, from the insight—the wisdom—one has. Solomon passed on that wisdom in various ways, and it reached "all kings of the earth".

Ecclesiastes 12:10–11
"The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.
The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd." (Christianity.com)
"Acceptable words" means the right words—how something is put into words. What is written—these proverbs—are regarded by the Bible as truth. So we should take them seriously. That applies to this book, and to Solomon's other book: Proverbs.
"Goads" and "nails" are virtually the same idea. A "goad" is something that pricks—like a pin. A "nail" is like a spike. With "goad" you have the thought that it leaves an impression: you are pricked by something and it stays with you; sometimes it leaves a scar. Nails do the same in the Bible, as with the "print of the nails". "The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."
The meaning there is twofold. That is the beauty of proverbs, and of wisdom in general: it often has multiple meanings, and that is what makes the words and the phrasing so rich. Wise proverbs goad and nail: they leave an impression and spur people on—"a spur to …". "The words of the wise" seize you and will not let you go; you carry them with you.

On the other hand, nails are driven into a wall so that you can hang something on them—perhaps a piece of your life. It stays with you; it becomes part of you; it fills you. With “nails fastened” deep, you have a firm hold. They are strong goads that motivate you. In any case, they matter.
Words are extraordinarily powerful. Everything we hear, we take into ourselves—if it is worth taking in. That makes a man what he is, because words fill our heart and so form the spirit.
It says they are “given from one shepherd”. The “wise man” is suddenly called a shepherd: they are “the words of the wise”, but they are given by that one Wise One. That cannot be otherwise. If that Wisdom is Truth, then all those words of the wise have one and the same Source. There is only one Truth, namely the Word of God, or higher still: the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why He is named as the Source at the end of verse 11.
“In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”
We have this treasure, Paul says, “in earthen vessels”. And so the circle is closed.
What the apostle reproaches the Corinthians for is that they do not allow themselves to be filled with those treasures—that they let themselves be filled with the wisdom of the world and of men, rather than the life of Christ, “who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:”
I know someone who also began with the Bible, but by now stands on the other side and says we should not take what is in the Bible so literally any more. He was evangelical; he calls himself “neo-evangelical” nowadays. Instead of immersing himself in the Bible, the man studied and now teaches philosophy. And then you are simply gone, because then it becomes about what man invents. That is philosophy, and it stands completely opposed to the Bible. The Bible is not philosophy; the Bible is wisdom—wisdom of God, even. The emphasis in 1 Corinthians 1 is on God’s wisdom, in contrast to the wisdom that comes to us from human tradition, culture, and thus human philosophy. That is why we are warned in Colossians:

> “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

Philosophy from man is “vain deceit”, and in practice the world is built on it. But it does not lead one to Christ. One should come to the Lord, to the Word of God, to be taught. It is the Lord Himself who, in His Word, offers us that wisdom—more than we can contain, and therefore more than enough to fill us.
“Masters of assemblies” in verse 11 are master gatherers: masters in gathering wisdom—gathering experiences, and processing them into understanding.

Ecclesiastes 12:12
“And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.”
(Christianity.com)

We have one Bible, with the wisdom of God fixed in it. And besides that we have a “few” books in the world. About those it says: “and further … be admonished.” That corresponds to the warning in Colossians. Of making books “there is no end”: there are more and more. It also means: it has no sense, no goal, and leads to nothing.
We have enough in that one Book—in principle. (Though on other occasions I also say that there are things in the Bible we would not understand if we did not have some book somewhere that explains them —for instance, the destruction of Jerusalem is foretold in Scripture, and you still need a history book that records that it did indeed happen; otherwise you do not know what it is talking about.) Nevertheless, fundamentally it remains with that one Book.
The more books, the more there is to read—and you only become tired from it, says the Preacher. There are several reasons why that can be said. You may read a lot, but if you do nothing with it, if you do not process the information, then it does nothing; it only takes time. That is what many do with the Bible: they read, but never think about it, and so it never becomes their own.
The more you know, the harder it is to get things in order. You do not so much need to learn many things, as to learn the right things: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” That means you must throw the rest away; you must forget it. What does not fit: out with it. You must be able to select.
The body does that too. You put something in at the top (as the Bible puts it), and part of it is useful; another part is “cast out”. That is what the Lord Jesus says in Mark 7. So it is with our spiritual metabolism as well.
Much reading also has no point in the long run for the simple reason that nothing truly new is ever being said. At some point it ends. The things have been said. Then someone else may say it again, or write it again—another book, and another book. You can keep yourself busy like that forever.

Ecclesiastes 12:13
“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”
“The conclusion of the whole matter” is the closing statement of the matter. It is its goal, namely: fear God and keep His instructions. I deliberately say instructions. Those who think this means that one must simply keep commandments make things far too easy for themselves. What we are to do is to keep His instructions, and keep here means to preserve, to hold fast. Keeping His commandments does not mean that you merely do what He has commanded or refrain from what He has forbidden, but that you allow yourself to be taught by Him. The intention is “to keep his way according to thy word” (Psalm 119:9). We are to fill our hearts with the instructions of God, and this is the duty of all mankind. It applies to every human being.

Ecclesiastes 12:14

“For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”
This is all the more important because God will indeed bring every work into judgment. By “work” one may understand the practical life of man. Allowing oneself to be taught is also a work. When it says “with every secret thing”, I am inclined to think that it refers precisely to what is hidden: hidden works. Not outward works, but the inner works of man. Man looks on what is before the eyes, but God looks on the heart, and that is what counts for Him. That is what remains of a man who stands before God. What was in our hearts? With what did we fill our spirit? And so it comes down to wisdom.
I sometimes say—somewhat laconically—that when we one day stand before the Lord, He may say to us: What did you think of My book? You cannot then say to the Lord: Well, I actually found it rather difficult; I thought I’d see later how it all works out. And then the Lord asks: Did you love Me?—Oh yes—and yet you did not even read My book. That is something no one can justify, not as a human being and certainly not as a believer.
God expects us to open our hearts to Him, to listen to His Word, to everything He has to say to us—and that is a great deal.
Through this we are meant to be formed and to grow from childhood to sonship. For God desires to give us the inheritance He has promised us.

> 1 Peter 1:3–4
> “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
> To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you,”

The Bible teaches us this, and we are meant to learn to understand these things. The work that He has begun in us, He intends to complete.

> Philippians 1:6
> “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:”

It is often thought that the Lord sets us to work, but that is not the case. He brings us into rest. We are to cease from our own works and open our lives so that He may do His work in us.
That does not lead to idleness in the practical course of life. On the contrary, it fills our hearts and our lives. It forms us according to His image, namely the image of God’s Son (2 Corinthians 3:18).
There is nothing more important for us than to know Him—to acquire wisdom. In this way we learn to understand that it is not about the here and now, nor about the world around us, nor even about our behaviour, but about Him filling us with His Word—with Christ Himself.
Where He takes shape in us, we possess a richness that far surpasses any wealth this world can offer. Money does not make one happy. What does? William Shakespeare put it well: “For ’tis the mind that makes the body rich.”
Our wealth lies in our inner man, in our spirit. And whatever may yet happen in this vain life, we remain rich in Him, because we have set our

hope on what is yet to come—on that which the Lord will still give us in the future.
In this dependence upon Him we live, and we allow ourselves to be shaped by Him.